Maria J. Żychowska*

Town-museum. Impression of Normandy

The shore of the English Channel

The healing effect of the climate and sea baths has been highly appreciated since antiquity and spending vacation by the sea has been primarily the British tradition dating back to the 18th century. The first bath facilities were developed there and the guests could take a bath in the North Sea or drink tea. With the advance of rail transport at the beginning of the 19th century, the coast was opened to everybody not only elites. Traveling by train proved efficient and inexpensive both for short excursions and vacation trips.

Similar trends were witnessed on the other side of the English Channel, on the coast of Belgium and north France. Sea resorts appeared there, e.g. famous Ostend, as well as a number of smaller charming towns although often they looked the same. Usually they would have broad promenades with narrow tall buildings along the sea, facing the sea. In general in the summer they offered accommodation with a large sleeping area (it was important to provide room for many beds) and a living room always with the view of the sea. They were constructed right next to the sea esplanade or near the beach by the streets going to the esplanade. Farther locations with no view of the sea were not as popular and that is why the division of land for investments was very specific: narrow and deep plots. The buildings were constructed as rows of tall and slender houses resembling rows of soldiers. However, the dominant vertical composition of the façades was not monotonous. The fabulous shapes of the buildings with tall roofs determined the character of the towns. The appearance of the façades was a priority and demonstrated originality to satisfy the diversity of tastes, needs, and requirements of the people visiting the popular beaches.

Mers-les-Baines

This is why 1880–1896 marked a significant urban growth in Le Tréport commune at the mouth of the Bresle River that had a long coast with gravel beaches (sand during low tides) at the foot of high chalky cliffs. The Bresle River separates two French regions: Normandy from Picardy, two departments: La Siene-Maritime from Somme, and two towns: Trésport from Mers-les-Baines. That commune includes three "sister" towns located close to one another: Eu, Le Tréport, Mers-les-Baines.

Belle Epoque

Mers-les-Baines, one of the towns, located directly by the sea, was mentioned already in the 11th century as *Ulteruis Portum;* its name derives from even older Roman name *Ultrensis Portus,* meaning *port that is beyond.*

The first important investment in Mers-les-Baines was a casino built in 1900, and on July 10, 1904, a railroad track was built to reach that place from Eu-Tréport [7]. When the railroad was built, Mers-les-Bains changed to a sea resort highly popular among Parisians. The unique architecture of the villas built at that time marked the be-

_____

* Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology.

Fig. 1. Mers-les-Baines (photo by M.J. Żychowska, 2011)

Il. 1. Mers-les-Baines (fot. M.J. Żychowska, 2011)

Fig. 2. Protection zones: around the seaside quarter – protected since 1986; protection zone of 500 meter radius around *Rip Villa* since 2008, source: [7]

Il. 2. Strefy ochronne: wokół dzielnicy nadmorskiej – strefa chroniona od 1986 roku; strefa chroniona w promieniu 500 metrów od willi *Rip* od 2008, źródło: [7]

ginning of *Art Nouveau,* a significant current in decorative art of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The buildings constructed at that time had very unique decorations with many turrets, balconies, and arched windows. Their architecture is a combination of beautiful local traditions and motifs taken from Modern Style, and it also illustrates the Belle Epoque atmosphere (Fig. 1). Over 300 such buildings still exist and they are the only such group of architecture from that period on the whole French coast [5]. They provide a unique climate of the town, an authentic document of that era perfectly preserved and maintained.

Architecture of the seaside resort

Due to its exceptionally rich, comprehensive, and diverse urban and architectural legacy in the scope of historical summer vacation buildings and balneological facilities, Mers-Les-Bains was listed by the conservation officer. Two protection zones were created: the first one, in 1986, was supposed to maintain the original condition of the designated area of the town. Without identifying their specific style, individual buildings, as belonging to the neo-regionalism also called Anglo-Flemish style or Secession style, it was decided to protect the whole seaside. The priority was to avoid the irrevocable transformations and incorrect renovation activities.

The other zone was created in April 2008 after the registration of *Rip Villa* on the List of Historical Buildings in France. The area of 500 meters around the building was listed too (Fig. 2).

Rip Villa [4], located by the sea at Général-Leclerc 62 esplanade (formerly *esplanade de la Plage*), was built after 1894 according to the design by the architect Jules Dupont from Mers-les-Bains (Fig. 3).

The name of the house derives from the name of Rip Van Winkle – the main character of the operetta composed in Paris in 1884 by Robert Planquette. Its libretto was based on the motifs of a Dutch legend describing a story of an indebted man who found treasure by the Hudson River. The story is set in the 19th century.

The house was built on a narrow and deep plot, just like the other neighboring buildings. Its façade was originally made of unpainted, red, and white bricks and the stairs were made of wood and not of concrete as at present.

The original interior layout in *Rip Villa* has been preserved, which is exceptionally rare today. Most interiors of the house have been remodeled, usually divided into smaller apartments. The spatial layout of the interior is typical of that kind of buildings. The ground floor rooms in the front would typically, just like the higher floors, face the sea. The ground floor windows in that villa are slightly recessed in relation to the rest of the façade. The rooms farther in the apartments have indirect lighting exposure or from a little back yard. The staircase is exposed to the light through glazed fanlights. Such an ingenious plan to fit all needed functions in a small space is still clear and rather rare nowadays. *Rip Villa* is in that respect unique as since the moment of its construction it has had one owner.

Mers-les-Bains is not only a balneological center with a representative seaside promenade and neighboring streets with houses to be rented to summer vacationers – it is a town of its own. That double role is reflected in the style of its historical architecture: on the one hand, it has typical houses and villas to be rented, built in the neo-regional convention also called Anglo-Flemish, sometimes richly decorated and, on the other hand, the buildings in the Napoleon III style, usually built for the town dwellers themselves.

Claire de Lune Villa, one of three segments of a bigger building originally designed to be rented to vacation-

Fig. 3. *Rip Villa* (photo by M.J. Żychowska, 2011)

Il. 3. Willa *Rip* (fot. M.J. Żychowska, 2011)

Fig. 4. *Claire de Lune Villa* (photo by M.J. Żychowska, 2011)

Il. 4. Willa *Claire de Lune* (fot. M.J. Żychowska, 2011)

ers is an example of the neo-regional style (Fig. 4). The other two are *Le Tourbillon* and *Le Crépuscule* which were built in 1902–1905 according to the design by the architect Georges Guyon. The whole complex has been remodeled a number of times but after it was thoroughly renovated it still presents the model characteristic features of the convention [2].

Brick is the main building material which is visible in the whole façade. The roof was partly covered with flat tiles and partly slates. The functional layout is simple and it corresponds to the objective and easy to read on the façade. The decorations of the façade and the decorations of the villa are consistent with its structure: an elevated ground floor with a small terrace: characteristic and accentuated element. Above, there is a bedroom with a diligently designed beautiful wooden oriel. Above it, there is an open balcony, more moderated and elegant that almost blocks the upper windows.

The façade is predominantly made of brick combined with stone, more exquisite details and clay decorations. Together, they compose a harmonized, original façade. Although the building is composed of three twin houses, each part of the façade has a slightly different tectonics: a varied program of bay windows, porches, dormers and rich, colorful decorations and details which are so characteristic of that style. This was probably caused by the need for diversity to avoid similarities between those three hotels when renting.

In respect of the materials used, it should be stressed that local raw materials were applied. The idea that only local raw materials should be used at the seaside and in the region was justified by tradition: brick and stone used in some crucial fragments, fir wood (better than oak tree in seaside climate due to its resistance to moisture) was used for roof construction, floors, joinery and façade elements.

Architecture of the town

The style of architecture of the permanent town dwellers is the Napoleon III style which is more simplified and raw, especially in comparison with the other one used for commercial purposes. For instance the twin villa *La Mésange*, built at the end of the 19th century at Henri-Leboeuf Street 68 (Fig. 5), illustrate that style convention [2]. One building was modified by adding decorative lintels. The other resembles the Napoleon III style more. The two-axis façade of both villas corresponds to the circulation and residential parts of the house. The hierarchy of the fol-

lowing floors was accentuated by the balconies with metal forged balustrades and prominent lintels. The uppermost floor has simple windows with no balustrades. Above the brick cornice line, there are dormers. The colors are simple: combination of brick, elements of light concrete, and light joinery elements. The turquoise clay cabochons add life to the whole structure. The metal balustrades that decorate the façade provide lightness and finesse.

In general, the façades are rather simple in comparison to those with bay windows, paneling, and wooden balco-

Fig. 5. Two-family *La Mésange Villa,* source: [3]

Il. 5. Dwurodzinna willa *La Mésange,* źródło: [3]

nies and as such they are a good example of that style characteristic of the houses bourgeoisie and local town dwellers from that time.

This part of architecture of Mers-les-Bains is sometimes also richly decorated with all kinds of details and elements which can be examples of diversity and excellence of the 19th and 20th-century French arts and crafts. It is easy to see that this architecture was enriched with rare and original ceramic details of various provenance. They are made of terracotta, clay or glazed vitrified clay. They have their own highly sophisticated style and their façades accentuate for instance the rhythm by the patterns of colorful bricks, nails, pegs, pins and rosettes as well as boards and decorative panels. They partly fill the façade structures, accentuating the load bearing elements such as the keystones in the lintels. They decorate roofs and façades with timeless allegories. Apart from their strictly decorative purpose, those architectural ceramic elements convey some information too as they include symbols and signs alluding to the name of the town or distinctive branches of its economy.

Specific character of the town

The architectural resources of the town are carefully secured by the municipal administration of Mers-les-Bains. Each investment or renovation in the protected area requires special permits both from the municipal authorities and the conservation officer who verifies the compliance of the project with the spirit of a given sector and its dominant architecture and provides his opinion. Obtaining such permits is obligatory for repairs of roofs, façades, doors, windows, joinery elements and fences. The appropriateness of selected building materials and suggested outdoor advertisements as well as lighting is also verified.

However, the town is not only its architecture and its urban layout. What is of great significance is also the unique cultural heritage of that region, including history, tradition, and the atmosphere of the whole coast. This heritage has a lot of spectacular aspects such as for example the selection of that very region of north Normandy by impressionist painters due to its special bright light. Such works by Claude Monet as *Impression, Sunrise* (1872), *Fishing Boats Leaving the Port of Le Havre* (1874) or *The Beach at Trouville* (1870) testify to that. There is even a Polish

aspect of that heritage because *The Beach at Pourville* – the only painting by Claude Monet in the Polish art collections from 1882 – was stolen from the Museum in Poznań in September 2000. Ten years later, it was finally found in the city of Olkusz, hidden in a wardrobe.

The works of impressionists as well as contemporary French paintings are present in the space of the town – just like the tragic history of the 20th century. Two world wars swept through that land. The remains of abandoned fortifications as well as the ruins of the Atlantic Wall are still visible and they often dominate the landscape. There are memories of a number of landings – for instance the Canadian troops landed in Mers-les-Baines. After that, a lot of buildings, including great historical sites, disappeared for ever, making room for cemeteries.

It is really because of a stroke of luck that the urban architectural complex of Mers-les-Baines still exists and is the only such group of architectural structures from that period on the whole French coast. It is a unique element of the cultural heritage and an authentic document of the past era, still interesting and still alive.

Translated by
Tadeusz Szałamacha

References

[1] http://www.an-patrimoine.org/Mers-les-Bains (access: 07.10.2011).

[2] http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/inventai/itiinv/Mers/images/texte (access: 07.10.2011).

[3] http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/inventai/itiinv/Mers/images/texte/maison_mersoise/style_napoleon.jpg (access: 07.10.2011).

[4] www.culture.gouv.fr/.../Mers/texte/la_villa_rip (access: 07.10.2011).

[5] http://inventaire.picardie.fr (access: 07.10.2011).

[6] http://www.ville-merslesbains.fr (access: 07.10.2011).

[7] http://www.ville-merslesbains.fr/site/pages/vivre/urbanisme/reglement.pdf (access: 07.10.2011).

Miasto-muzeum. Impresja z Normandii

Od starożytności wysoko ceniony był leczniczy wpływ klimatu i kąpieli morskich. Natomiast wakacje nad morzem to brytyjska tradycja sięgająca XVIII wieku. Tam uruchomiono pierwsze urządzenia kąpielowe, w których kuracjusze mogli albo wziąć kąpiel morską w Morzu Północnym albo pić herbatę. Wraz z nadejściem kolei na początku XIX wieku, wybrzeże zostało otwarte dla wszystkich, nie tylko dla elity. Podróż pociągiem stała się skutecznym i niedrogim sposobem zarówno na krótkie wycieczki, jak i na wakacje.

Podobne tendencje zagościły po drugiej stronie kanału La Manche. Na przykład w Normandii, na wybrzeżu Pikardii, w latach 1880–1896 odnotowano znaczący rozwój urbanistyczny trzech blisko siebie położonych miast Eu, Le Tréport, Mers-les-Baines. Pierwszą znaczącą inwestycją w Mers-les-Baines była realizacja kasyna w 1900 roku, a 10 lipca 1904 roku doprowadzono linię kolejowa z Eu-Tréport.

W zakresie kształtowania się architektury można tam odnotować trzy główne okresy rozwoju i ewolucji lokalnej stylistyki. Pierwsza faza to budowle utrzymana w prostym stylu, w którym dominującym materiałem była cegła. Jako dekoracja rzadko pojawiały się żeliwne balkony czy mansardy. Druga faza coraz bardziej związana z turystyką zdominowana była wpływami anglo-flamandzkimi z odczuwalną różnorodnością programów stylistycznych – wille i hotele z wykuszami i balkonami stawały się coraz bardziej imponujące. W trzeciej fazie, w czasach świetności, architektura zaczerpnęła z obfitości wzorców zawartych w kwiatowym stylu Art Nouveau.

Key words: Normandy, urban planning, architecture

Słowa kluczowe: Normandia, urbanistyka, architektura