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The Memory of Architecture and its Continuity Behind the Urban Memory

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Abstract

The problem addressed in this research is that of the representation of socio-political power of the dominating group in the built environment. The city of Warsaw serves as a case study to identify the process of transformation of urban identity through the reconstruction after the war damages. From the lens of European identity some other case studies, such as Dresden, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia. All these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what was called the Iron Curtain under the Soviet sphere and for various reasons have suffered more or less extensive destruction. Specifically, after major destruction during WW2, the urban form of Warsaw represents the material character of the city's history, largely excluding the main narratives of its former numerous Jewish communities as an important source of identity formation. The purpose of the study is to understand how this process came about, and how a sense of continuity with the past can be re-established. Addressing the case of Warsaw, four main issues are here evaluated: 1) expressions of power represented by zoning and its transfer to the creation of historic districts; 2) the origins of disparity of physical historical and contemporary environment; 3) problems within the field of architecture and urbanism in Eastern Europe and their relationship to the context. Through the linear relationship between architecture, memory and urban transformation this paper reports, works as agent of continuity, which in conjunction with the role of memory in the cross-time experiences brings the full experience of the past still alive in the present, by a projection to the future.

Keyword: Culture of City, Communities of memory, Social identity, Minorities

Introduction

The scenario when new systems are established, and the old ones are overthrown has always been an underlying scene of urban transformations. While in such revolutionary conditions much being eliminated and much being erected, the architecture produced by new regimes is as revealing as the physical matter it is replacing. In this context, the physical urban matter represents the tangible purpose of an ideological intent, both highlighting certain socio-political processes and being an agent of their realization.

After the Second World War, the Iron Curtain had been drawn across Europe, defining an artificial separation splitting the west from the communist Eastern Bloc. The relative divide, that ultimately was a product of the invention, resulted in a very tangible experience of parallel reality, not only keeping parties apart but also products of physical memory, habits, traditions, and self-identification: a settled up wide contrived divergence between two groups, disposed to produce what typically separation produces: tension or hostility. Thus, identity has been both spatialize and politicized.

The buffer zone between two separated worlds is considered the most critical part regarding the phenomenon of forced separation. Here, the materiality coming from the same focal point with those of the lands nominated as a “west” of “others”. So, specifically in the buffer zone, the Iron Curtain would have represented the effects of a destructive memory, and as a result both subject and object in the production and destruction of memory and identity.

Rather than affecting individual memory, this issue focus on “social memory” (“collective memory”), which manifold lays in the core of urban identity basis. This form of memory, while shared by a group, links its members and provides a coherent narrative from the past to the future. In a situation of conflict, the group memory, shaped by a jointly experienced trauma and a politicization of the past towards ideological apology, operates as a decisive moment for the future alternative experience. Architecture and urban form are decisive in affecting the “social memory” and hypothetically also producing it.

Stalinist power and urban form behind the Iron Curtain

After the events of World War Two, the European scene entered the reality of the socio-political redefinition. Heavily damaged lands of casualties stepped into an unprecedented phase of contextual zeroing with the multiple possibilities for the development. Possibilities presuppose a variety of choices and following decisions. These decisions in the case of the Eastern European land were and still are in the middle of the socio-spatial discourse, where an ideological declaration of power and its physical communication through the built form are deeply interrelated.

For the time, the planning vectors of both Western and Eastern Europe took the direction towards transforming the chaotic urban layout into an industrial metropolis. A centralized states' organization, where the governmental system was in charge of decision-making at all levels, was a foundation of communist cities. With the abolition of private ownership, urban development was highly controlled, aiming exclusively to fulfil states' ideology (Mariotti and Koželj, 2016).

The distribution of industry, accompanied by rapid social and urban growth, was an integral aspect of the evolution of the communist state (Musil, 1980). Unlike the Western experience, lands behind the Iron Curtain went through the processes of industrialization with unprecedented intensity. A strong mesh of industrial enterprises rapidly stretched along with the cities, creating fundamentally different spatial configurations and altering the urban fabric. It resulted in apparent fragmentation and a lack of coordination of infrastructure development.

No wonder that a centrally controlled planning system had to adapt to a growing demand for the newcomers. Thus, has started development of new high-density housing estates, typically located on the cities' outskirts.

A campaign of such transformations started in Bucharest in 1965. While altering adjacent territories, the built perimeter was extended and linked to the inner city by transforming the pre-existing realm and penetrating it with spacious boulevards (Danta, 1993). However, due to the insupportably sharp construction activity, the city entered the post-revolution with numerous unfinished buildings (Sudity, 2009).

In comparison, Vienna thought occupied by the Allies, did not go through such a transformation of real estate dynamics. In combination with a socialist urban planning policy, the local municipality decided to re-invest in the historic fabric. Therefore, fluid practices, typical for other marginal areas along the sides of the Iron Curtain, never took place. Contrarily, the population of Vienna since the end of World War Two has dropped (Paal, 2008).

In contrast to Western practices, the communist state rejected the decentralized design. Decisions towards urban spread were critical in establishing a mono-centric city with a strongly outlined centre and clear-cut suburbia. The intense gentrification within the former boundary of the medieval wall has witnessed Budapest. The policy of socialist leadership concentrated on establishing industrial areas and related housing estates on the fringe of the city. Instead, due to decades of neglect, the inner city has gradually deteriorated (Barta, 1998). Contemporary decontextualization is still evident.

The master plan for the post-war reconstruction of the Bulgarian capital was one of the attempts throughout the socialist epoch to improve monotonous suburbia. Nevertheless, it was almost never realized. In the case of Sofia, initially intending to supply the city with secondary centres and redirecting activities to the periphery, the local administration finished up with the centre prioritized for the subsequent development. Specific effort was made to redevelop the square near the former Royal Palace. Throughout replanning, the building itself was perceived as a symbol of a pre-war foreign power and intended to be pulled down, signifying the recent change of the regime (Stanoeva, 2017).

Newly formed national identities are often intolerant of plurality in their drive to building a coherent unity, justified historically but selectively. It was a characteristic pattern of the communist legacy in Eastern Bloc (Bevan, 2006). The transformation of Dresden followed this tendency. The large area of the historic fabric was rewritten in socialist modernism, breaking away from its German bourgeoisie past. A similar fate met the Czech capital. The core of Prague previously accommodated one of the most significant Jewish quarters in Europe. It was brutally redefined on the eve of industrialization, giving the floor to Stalin's campaign against past regimes, national minorities, and their architectural inheritance. Multiple alterations of urban narrative resulted in a very tangible experience of the fragmented matter (Chizzoniti, 2021).

Reshaped memory of Post-Communist era

The legacy of Eastern Block resulted in a homogeneous isotropic realm, in urban space presumed to extend endlessly. With the disappearance of the Iron Curtain cities of former borderland were integrated into the

international scope (Enyedi, 1998), shifting from state socialism to a market economy. The privatization and the restructuring of former state enterprises have fundamentally transformed urban landscapes (Keresztély and Scott, 2012).

Struggles surrounding World Wars and the Cold War sparked a series of discourses over historical architectural landmarks: whether to replace or repair them, competing over their future significance (Bevan, 2006). Established and re-established nationalism redirected ethnic and religious identities made profound changes in the cultural patterns until the vanishing of certain urban forms and narrowing multiple identities to the notion of “collective”. Thus, the subsequent fall of the Eastern Bloc, besides the physical matter, affected the social dimension and its self-identification. Searching for the identity cities such as Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, and Belgrade have been flooding with new spectacular international development. The resulting restructuring practices flattened the idea of a spatial to an abstract concept that is sometimes unable to contain any contextual meaning.

The studies around the inheritance of the communist epoch mainly focused on related to the legacy material outcomes. What was built is well studied, while a heterotopic reality of replaced context needs further definition. Identification of hidden meanings and layers within the transformed fabric would be a fundamental step towards a symptomatic reading of the present urban state.

Warsaw as a quintessence of related issues

During World War Two, the city of Warsaw was profoundly affected by both Nazi and Soviet bombings. Subsequent liquidation of the Ghetto brought distraction to an unprecedented level (Dziewulski and Jankowski, 1957). The following recovery was prompt bear the ideological mission: Warsaw meant to become a symbol of wartime sorrow and post-war rebirth. Following this implication, reconstruction of the urban core, Stare Miasto, was presented as a performance of a human feat, involving the entire nation in careful replicating of historic fabric to its former state (Figure 1).

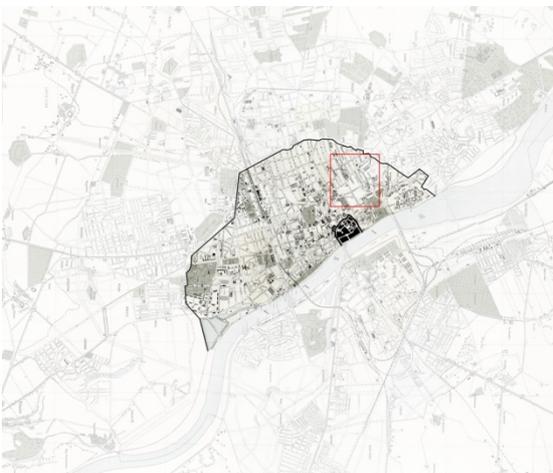


Figure 1. Warsaw (1934), “Samopomoc Inwalidzka” edition. The former boundary and the Stare Miasto are outlined with respect to the state of the Warsaw City Plan of 1831 by Clarke, W. B, marking the position of the Northern district.

However, the reconstruction that took place at the time was not an objective measure. Poles made a careful selection of what to repair from the ruins, retaining what they believed reflected their national past and eliminating what they thought did not. Thus, the process was juxtaposed between reconstruction and destruction and shaped by narrowed nationalistic ideas of cultural heritage (Meng, 2008).

Meanwhile, the leitmotif of the Six-Year-Plan for the overall development stressed the industrial production and revision of capitalist inequalities through the rational urban layout. *“New Warsaw cannot be merely a new edition of the old Warsaw”* nor *“it cannot be merely an improved repetition of the pre-war conglomeration of the private interests of capitalist society”* (Bierut, 1951: 121). Therefore, the overall urbanity covered a basic modernist pattern. Warsaw reflected all the characteristic processes of the ‘city of workers’ behind the Iron Curtain, continuing gentrified scenario.

“Our architects should, to a greater extent than now, draw on the same traditions of our national architecture, adapting them the new goals and new possibilities of building process, and infusing into them a new socialist spirit. Cut up into small districts and criss-crossed by the boundaries of private property, pre-war Warsaw had no chance to move towards large-scale town planning schemes, and to take advantage of ... the constantly growing needs of a great metropolis. These possibilities have been allowed full play by the new social system in which planned economy had laid the foundations for truly harmonious and manifold development of national architectural culture” (Bierut, 1951: 413). Thus, new housing complexes spread around suburbia, embraced by wide avenues and squares. Meanwhile, the capitalist realities in the direct vicinity to the restored centre were redefined by major socialist projects that dominated the Warsaw skyline then and still do today (Murawski, 2019). These interventions outlined the edge between the recollected past and the communist present, awaiting a 'favourable' future.

Jewish Warsaw

The Jewish legacy of Warsaw, witnessing and conveying an unpleasant past, underwent an inevitable redefinition and contributed to the global strategy of forgetting over the communist epoch. The heritage of Polish Jews was almost as old as that of Poland itself, intertwined with local urban forms over the city (Zubrzycki, 2017). By the mid-nineteenth century, 400.000 Jewish residents of Warsaw enjoyed the relative freedom of settling. However, the Muranów nearby the urban core and Northern district next to the cemetery remained the places, where Jewish life was concentrated at all levels of social interaction (Figure 1).

During World War Two, the concentration camp spread over the left bank of the Vistula river, covering and gradually vanishing Jewish sites. The subsequent bombing incinerated almost every trace of Jewish presence when Warsaw went under the communist policy.

Polish sociologist of the time Stanisław Ossowski (1946), cited by Meng, encouraged to consider for the preservation only aspiring buildings with the potentiality of very practical contribution to the *“future needs*

of the city" (Meng, 2008: 74). Sites of the former Ghetto were mainly perceived to be worthless under these criteria. Ossowski insisted that the Jewish legacy does not contribute to the city as it is "*culturally foreign to Polish society*," thus, might be sacrificed for the sake of the socialist future (Meng, 2008: 75). As a result, Jewish sites did not appear in afterward Warsaw's list of historic monuments.

Intending to reinforce the Communist order in the rebirth of Warsaw, the Marszałkowska Housing District by Jozel Sigalin sprawled across Muranów. Though conceptualized as utopian working-class real estate, it was instead densely inhabited by the political elite of the time. With its greatness and enormous scale, the intervention reflected the ideology of the state. Such a monumentality presupposed structural changes to the pre-war urban layout of the neighbourhood. Thus, Marszałkowska Street was widened, and the new urban layout sharply cut the pattern beyond the estate.

On the other side, the Northern district was covered by the massive typical housing construction (Figure 2). Its architecture was even less significant than the message beyond the development. It was a propagandist action, organized by the Communist Party, with working foremen competing in a number of bricks walled up within a day. The scale of the work for clearing the rubble of the Jewish legacy was unaffordable. So, the construction spread right on the ruins of the former Ghetto (Bierut, 1951). Today it appears to be hilarious, however, once it was a serious social manipulation taken for granted (Meng, 2008).

Once being the core of the Muranów district, the Great Synagogue on nearby Tłomacka Street was dynamited in 1943 (Murawski, 2019). After clearing a rubble, the area remained vacant. In 1976 the first metal shell of the future skyscraper, signifying a new era, started to appear. The structure, made in light blue reflective glass, towers over the northern part of central Warsaw (Meng, 2008). Currently, the pre-war times of Muranów are represented exclusively by the Nożyk Synagogue. Meanwhile, the cemetery is the only survived witness of long Jewish history along the Northern district. It spread over the waste area, burying multiple stories, fates, names. Silently - not many can listen.

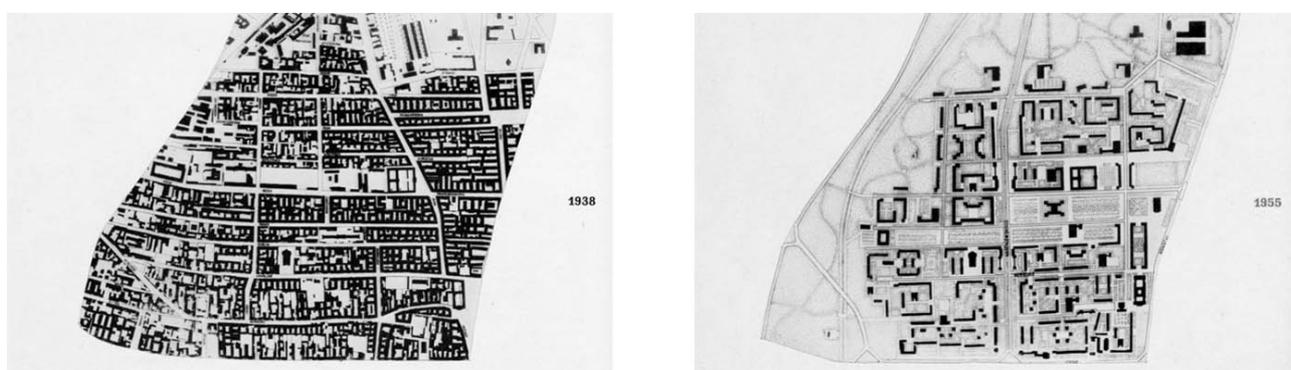


Figure 2. Transformation of Northern district according to Bierut, B. (1951) in the Six-year plan for the reconstruction of Warsaw .

The selection of preserved fragments is always based on a perspective of time and place, frequently used as a tool of political manipulation over cultural heritage. Although the reconstruction of Warsaw is an achievement of a human feat, however, still transmits a remodelled understanding of urban history through the lens of certain political and social factors. Thus, it reflects the wider debate around preservation and its subjectivity. In this context, recently erected Polin Museum of Warsaw, made in so-called international style, symbolizes broader concepts towards the former Jewish presence where the memory is not embodied but simply recognized.

Conclusions

Architecture is a complex phenomenon. It definitely changes sense and perception when it's produced in a dictatorship or authoritarian regime, so as the power is typically expressed by visual means. Architecture represents an ideal form of such expression. On the other way round, it happens that some spaces become part of democracy, even if they are not planned to be. Recently the case of Tahrir Square in Cairo and - during Egypt's Arab Spring in 2011- and the Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) became a symbol of conflict. In that case, we can see how the role of collective memory is equally significant and antithetical to the other planned forms of propaganda mechanisms, such as the role of architecture, from dictatorships are designed to portray the power of the leader and the regime.

The conceptual connection between Architecture and Memory belongs to all history of art. Numerous studies have been written about the mechanism that links architecture and memory, many essays have claimed the lack of memory in modernism (Yates, 1978). Yet, memory can be used as an element of political propaganda and ideological influence for the subjugated masses by authoritarian regimes.

The transition to a communist state in the former Eastern Bloc *"imposed a set of priorities and restrictions on architects that were not formal, or even material"*; this process *"established a professional culture through which a set of practices and standards emerged"* (Zarecor, 2014: 273). The ideology under the communist construction laid the ground for the basic architectural principle in Eastern Europe. Thus, also after post-communist transition Soviet architectural traditions are being embodied today in new conditions (Chmelnizki, 2013).

As we can see architecture as art cannot produce any ideal emotion unless we associate it with our memory. In the case treated in this paper we can argue about the useless process of selective memory in neglecting the role, the tradition, and the history of the recent Stalinist architectural experience. Peter Zumthor (Zumthor et. al, 2018) exploring all the aspects of memory, makes them revealed through architecture.

The time of the great communist state has passed and contributed to the long book of shared history. The issue is not in the Stalinist legacy itself. Rather the problem is that it has won the battle with preceding urban stories, but failed against time, so was sentenced to collapse. The process generated a crisis of the political

and social systems, the search for identity, that started during the post-Soviet time and still ongoing, is represented in a built form. "Jurij Tynjanov noted that people living through a particular historical period often feel as though they are located in a gap between cultures, even though history has no gaps". This sense of disjunction is, perhaps, the best way to describe the current situation of post-communist culture: "something has ended, but nothing new has yet been formed..." (Dobrenko, 2011: 167).

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