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THE ORIGIN OF OUR "HERE AND NOW". MODERNISATION AND MUSEALISATION OF WARSAW URBAN SPACE DURING THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

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Abstract: The article contains both a description and an analysis of processes creating the urban space of Warsaw during the inter-war period (1918–1939). On the one hand, they include the parallel development of activity regarded as examples and symbols of modernisation (avant-garde architecture, urban planning, and "state-building" monumentalism), and, on the other hand, parallel "musealisation" (reconstruction as a

conservation method, restoration of historic urban ambiance) described according to present-day terminology. The article also points to the continuity of the titular processes and the ideas constituting them, always topical in periods of an intense search for collective identity and spatial forms in which it is manifested (e.g. at the time of post-war reconstruction in 1945–1956 and at the turn of the nineteenth century).

Keywords: modernisation, museologisation, architecture, urban planning, historic monuments.

Monuments and history

During the nineteenth and twentieth century views concerning the conservation and restoration of buildings and the revalorisation of complexes regarded as historical underwent essential transformations. In the first half of the nineteenth century many undertakings were conducted in the spirit of stylistic unity, at the same time constructing the modern concept of the monument. The most outstanding restorer of the period, Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, renovated the church in Vézelay in the spirit of a search for an architectural optimum,

conducted work on the urban complex in Carcassonne and on Château de Pierrefonds, and supervised the restitution of Sainte-Chappelle and the Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris, altering the French landscape and, at the same time, the image of the mediaeval past cultivated by the French. Thanks to his authority – the consequence of praxis and published theoretical reflections – he encouraged to carry out restorations similar from the viewpoint of intentions although not always as regards the quality of execution. Viollet-le-Duc recognised the purposefulness of restoring a building in a style suitable from the perspective

of the restorer but recommended its thorough examination prior to embarking upon work as well as flexibility of its direction. Furthermore, he granted knowledge about mediaeval architecture the same features as those of the norms of natural sciences, treating deductions of past architectural forms in the manner of conclusions drawn from palaeontology and citing the accomplishments of Georges Cuvier, a zoologist and palaeontologist celebrated for his reconstructions of animal fossils using their minute fragments and performed upon the basis of a presupposed co-relation of inner organs. Viollet-le-Duc perceived himself as a second Cuvier resurrecting architectural forms from past epochs. He also expressed the following conviction: To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness that could have never existed at any given time1 [this and further emphasis - P.M.].

Practical restoration, especially in the version proposed by the emulators of Viollet-le-Duc, became the object of criticism initiated in 1848 by John Ruskin, who maintained that it is impossible, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture (religious experience shared by Ruskin indicates, however, that belief in exceptions from this rule is possible...), and thus restoration means the most total destruction which a building can suffer (The Seven Lamps of Architecture). In the second half of the nineteenth century no one in any European country exerted a similar impact upon the imagination of his nation. Ruskin maintained that the title of an artist was deserved by a person capable of expressing traces of divine presence in matter, materialised in Nature. The Ruskin doctrine, while keeping a distance from all forms of sustaining old architecture, excluded, therefore, acts of human pride and usurpation, i.e. reaching for something due to the Creator.²

The essence of the guality and status of a monument (Denkmal), which up to this day constitutes a point of reference in debates on the value of heritage, was fundamentally formulated in 1903 by the Austrian historian of art Alois Riegl. In his opinion the most important feature of a monument is its age value (der Alterswert), constituting the reason for acknowledging a given object as a monument. With those premises as his point of departure, the Czech historian of art Max Dvořák, Riegl's co-worker at the Imperial Central Commission for the study and conservation of art and historical monuments, declared that a renovated relic is no longer a relic. Both scholars represented a stand calling for the protection of historical monuments against attempts at reconstruction, treating them as a sui generis forgery of a historical source; this is also the reason why they criticised the programme of restoring Wawel Castle, pursued by Polish artists and their milieu.³ Riegl also noticed changes in the comprehension of the concept of the monument, into which - in the course of the development of the conception and actual existence of the <u>nation</u> – human accomplishments turned predominantly owing to their historical and axiological value and not merely their artistic and aesthetic worth. The Alterswert question was broached also by the Prussian researcher and inventoriser Georg Dehio, who urged: conserve, do not restore4 (a significant fact since he was familiar with the nationalistic instrumentalisation of the value of historical legacy).

Polish conservators, in particular those living in the shadow of Wawel Hill, were also inspired by those reflections. In 1901 Cracow-based Ludwik Puszet declared: Restoration should be only tantamount to conservation and no stylisation [should] be introduced while the novelty, which it adds, [should be] authentically Modernist. Józef Muczkowski too popularised the principle of preserving historical monuments in the shape found by the given generation and called for not reverting them to the imagined original state. A convention held in 1909 by the Society for the Protection of Monuments of the Past passed a resolution preferring conservation but, at the same time, permitting restricted and scientifically justified restoration.⁵

Practice, however, strayed from declarations, in particular when historical substance, valuable for a given community, became damaged as a consequence of a sudden cataclysm.

When in 1902 the bell tower of St. Mark's in Venice toppled it was decided to rebuild its historical form. A precise reconstruction was carried out according to the original model – with the preservation of the type and colour of the bricks – because it was recognised that the urban landscape would not remain the same without one of its prime spatial accents. This episode became particularly important from the viewpoint of the devastation produced by a World War which, it was not known at the time, would turn out to be the first of its sort.⁶

The Great War

Losses suffered at the time of the First World War, which affected not only particular buildings, such as Reims cathedral, but also entire historical towns, e.g. Arras, Louvain, and Ypres, questioned the principle of limited conservation in favour of restoration and restitution. War permanently verified conservation principles formulated in the conditions of peacetime stability.⁷

At the time of World War I many historical buildings in Polish lands, and even entire town quarters, turned into ruins. Now reflections deliberated not whether but how to rebuild the ravaged monuments. In 1916 art historian Józef Piotrowski declared: Just like the masters of old always acted it is necessary to rebuild even if within totally new shapes but well-connected with the entire monument and corresponding to present-day aesthetic demands and architectural trends. With those premises as a point of departure it was decided to recreate the destroyed centre of the town of Kalisz.8 Tadeusz Szydłowski treated the question of prolonging the existence of historical monuments as a political task; in doing so he indicated the connection between national awareness and the protection of monuments of art. Faithful to the Rieglian doctrine he agreed that a historical monument is visible as long as it remains genuinely old and authentic. At the same time, Szydłowski recognised the necessity of raising historical buildings out of wartime ruins. ⁹ Today, therefore, we shall stand under a sign other than that of Riegl - postulated Jarosław Wojciechowski, Edward Trojanowski, and Zygmunt Otto – not only to conserve but also to rebuild. Just like the mythical Phoenix, gutted villages and small towns shall be reborn from ashes, cottages and manor houses, schools and churches shall be rebuilt together with other monuments of

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architecture. Valuable monuments of architecture, as long as their ruination was caused not by time but by a sudden catastrophe. not only can but should be rebuilt. 10

It is worth noting on the margin that the social and historical awareness of losses suffered by Polish culture and caused by the Great War is incomparably smaller than that of losses generated by the Second Word War, although the scale of the actual destruction (with the exception of the demolition of Warsaw in 1944) was comparable in both those periods.¹¹

Remaining within the main current of the discourse conducted at the time, in December 1916 the Scientific Circle of Architects at the Warsaw Polytechnic prepared Uwagi do szkicu wstępnego planu regulacyjnego Wielkiej Warszawy, a precursory document among those originating from the time-in-office of President Stefan Starzyński. The co-author of Uwagi, the above-mentioned Jarosław Wojciechowski, wrote about historical Warsaw: There is no room in it for monumental undertakings and architectural projects for the future. The latter must develop in the lifeless and soulless terrains of New Warsaw (...), in all those places to which history has not yet made its claims. 12

After 123 years of servitude

In the renascent Polish state conservators, without negating the principles established by Riegl, took part in clearing urban space of buildings identified with the effects of denationalisation conducted by the partitioning powers, in particular in the Russian partition area. According to decisions made by tsarist authorities, after the fall of the January Uprising Privislinski kray was to become covered by a network of Russian Orthodox churches located in a way that would testify to the dominating character of imperial architecture. The fate of the church of St. Alexander Nevsky, erected in Saski Square in Warsaw, was - in this battle waged for iconosphere - the most prominent example of the subsequent reaction. In the wake of lengthy disputes, with the church's defenders evoking artistic criteria, it was razed starting with the accompanying bell tower while the demolition of the entire building took place in 1922–1926. The rubble was used for regulating the river bed of the Vistula, the pink Finnish granite ultimately decorated the façade of the State Geological Institute, and after 1935 the columns were deployed for designing the crypt of Józef Piłsudski on Wawel Hill. 13

The majority of theoreticians propagating pure conservation simultaneously opted for supplementing historical buildings with contemporary elements. In this spirit, in 1928 the façades of houses in the Market Square of the Warsaw Old Town were covered, under the supervision of Zofia Stryjeńska and Stanisław Ostrowski and the patronage of the Society for the Protection of Monuments of the Past, with contemporary polychromes, which gave rise to numerous doubts. 14 Many instances of reconstruction from the period were linked with a wish to restore the original state. In destroyed Old Towns attempts were made to grant rebuilt houses shapes close to former ones and to introduce details referring to historical counterparts, a tendency expressing a quest for the local or national character of architecture, connected with ethnographic studies and fashionable regionalism (present, e.g. in the writings of Stefan Żeromski).15

During the inter-war period a study by Alfred Lauterbach, issued in 1929, was regarded as a basic programme publication concerning the philosophy of conservation. Its author drew attention to the unsuitability of limited restorations of living monuments of architecture although he respected the stratifications occurring within. Following the example of Ruskin, Lauterbach accentuated that from the theoretical point of view there is no difference between the exchange of a single square meter and a whole wall, but he did not draw conclusions resembling those formulated by Ruskin. Small or large restoration will be always necessary – he wrote – something that present-day reticence or hypocrisy call conservation. Lauterbach was of the opinion that pure conservation may be applied only in the case of well-preserved objects or lifeless ones, i.e. ruins. ¹⁶

In 1931 Alfred Lauterbach and Marian Lalewicz represented Poland at an international congress, which passed the Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments. The Charter ascertained a general tendency to abandon restorations in toto and to avoid the attendant dangers and approved the striving present among conservators and architects towards placing social interests above private ones.¹⁷ In 1938 Lauterbach wrote in a summary of his inter-war experiences: The necessity of rebuilding after the Great War numerous valuable monuments and even entire historical complexes by the very force of things propounded the principle of historical restoration and reconstruction, while reluctance towards this method is decreasing due to the growing possession of precise data and operating with concrete material, and not with assumptions and fantasies as has been often the case in historical restorations during the past century. 18 After all, the Polish school of the conservation of historical monuments came into being long before 1945.

What was the binding legal state pertaining to the protection of monuments of architecture in Poland reborn in 1918? A decree issued by the Regency Council on the protection of monuments of art and culture (31 October 1918) offered protection to all movable and immovable works testifying to the art and culture of past epochs and existing for no less than 50 years. In this fashion, quite innovative for the period, it was provided to recognise urban and rural complexes as monuments, and historical value was perceived in the historical outlay of towns, gardens, and parks. ¹⁹ In view of the ephemeral political character of the Regency Council the decree in question remained rather in a de lege ferenda than a de lege lata sphere.

A legal act regulating the protection of cultural property, and in force all the way to 1962, was the Regulation of the President of the Republic of Poland of 6 March 1928 on the Protection of Historical Monuments, amended by the Act of 1933 on the Protection of Public Museums. The Regulation defined that a monument is each object, immovable and movable, characteristic for a certain epoch, possessing artistic, cultural, historical, archaeological or palaeontological value confirmed by a statement made by state authorities and consequently deserving to be preserved. The surrounding

of historical buildings and their complexes could be also acknowledged as a monument. In the case of architectural objects practical use was made of the criterion of time, perceiving the age value in hundred-year old buildings. An essential element of the legal order in force was the protection of the urban landscape, postulated rather than realised; terrains created by aesthetically valuable towns and districts were recognised as cultural legacy.²⁰

Andrzej Tomaszewski summed up the intellectual discourse of the inter-war period from the perspective of the turn of the twentieth century by writing: The new [Rieglian] conservation philosophy was in its spirit fundamental. The extreme nature of its prohibitions and restrictions corresponded to that of its purist [à la Viollet-le-Duc] predecessor. (...)

Science and research were not to serve – as had been the case before – creating a foundation for reconstruction undertakings but scientific acquaintance with historical monuments in their capacity as a source/historical document. The new philosophy became accepted in Europe half way: the number of believers was large but that of the practicing faithful was lesser. The nineteenth century left behind two serious limitations: the education and mentality of the architects of the period, happily tampering with a monument upon each opportune occasion, unable and unwilling to adopt an ascetic attitude. They [also] included modern awareness of national identity aroused during the era of Romanticism (...). This is the reason why the twentieth century was marked by an acute conflict between theory and praxis. It was a century of conservation hypocrisy and dramatic attempts at conciliating contradictions. 21

Dreams of a better city

During the inter-war period numerous milieus cultivated the conviction that the modern world - presumably better, albeit variously comprehended and imagined - could and should be constructed in the manner of a town. Modernising architects were of the opinion that the contemporary urban environment, composed also of a social structure and demography, required a special sort of correction: the population of Warsaw grew from 820 000 in 1919 to 1 265 000 twenty years later. At the same time, 43% of Warsaw flats were composed of a single room without any sanitary amenities and were inhabited by almost 70% of the population, mainly working-class (900 000 persons). Attempts at remedying this state of things involved an encounter of avant-garde plans of a functional Warsaw, launched by Jan Chmielewski and Szymon Syrkus, and étatist projects of a monumental Warsaw, conceived by Stefan Starzyński.²²

The Athens Charter, prepared in 1933 by the International Congress of Modern Architecture, known as CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne), was the <u>Bible</u> of avant-garde architects. Most of the over thirty towns examined in the course of preparations for the Congress, including Warsaw, were found to be unsuitable from the viewpoint of the fundamental life requirements of their residents. The authors of the Charter stated: *At any event*,

it is impossible to coordinate them [individual liberty and collective action] in a harmonious way without preparing in advance a carefully studied program that leaves nothing to chance. Referring to architectural legacy they added: Precious witnesses of the past... will be respected although after profound examination which objects and complexes may be adapted for contemporary use or as monuments of culture. The decisive conclusion declared: Under no circumstances should the cult of the picturesque and the historical take precedence over the healthfulness of the dwelling. In other words: In certain cases, it is possible that the demolition of unsanitary houses and slums around some monument of historical value will destroy an age-old ambience. This is regrettable, but it is inevitable.²³

In Poland the most representative for this trend of architectural thought was the Praesens group, established in 1926 and closely co-operating with CIAM. Its founders included: Bohdan Lachert, Szymon Piotr and Helena Syrkus, and Jerzy Szanajca. Architects belonging to this milieu or its sympathisers were also engaged in the realisation of the idea of social architecture and co-operated with the Warsaw Housing Co-operative, the Social Building Enterprise, the Workers' Estates Society, the Polish Society for Housing Reform, and the Architects' Circle at the Democratic Cub (Adam Kotarbiński, Jan Minorski). Projects for the development of the capital city and the legacy of functional Warsaw, conceived in avant-garde circles, survived a successive world war and got their chance due to wartime devastation. Members of the former Praesens and those gathering around them before the war and during the occupation in the Architecture-Town Planning Studio of the Warsaw Housing Co-operative WSM comprised the conceptual core of the Capital City Reconstruction Office BOS.²⁴

Étatisation of memory

During the 1930s Polish architects and town planners shared a fascination with the <u>town-creating</u> accomplishments of Benito Mussolini, expressed by Stanisław Brukalski, student at the Milan Polytechnic: *Nothing new was erected in new Rome, and this great chaotic town was turned into a modern quarter merely by opening its centre*. The Apennine Peninsula was envisaged as a site for the implementation of the idea of modernity in a social, political, and town-planning dimension. Within this context the following declaration: *The thought about a certain town-planning-architectural dictatorship in Warsaw appears to be actually the sole measure capable of preventing the present-day disgrace of the capital was by no means surprising.*²⁵

Such fascination was not limited exclusively to forms of urban space but encompassed also the model of state patronage practiced in Italy and belonging to the sources of moulding urban space. Authors anticipated state commissions, subsidies, and statutory guarantees of focusing a certain part of the costs of building investments on modern painted decorations. The economic crisis of the 1930s rendered those expectations even more conspicuous. In 1934 artists engaged in the creation of official art presented the postulate of introducing centralised supervision over artistic life, starting with purchases and the establishment of galleries all the way to protecting the author. At the same time, they declared a readiness to serve the state:

www.muzealnictworocznik.com MUZEALNICTWO 59 | 37

a memorandum containing the above-listed postulates, prepared by the Main Board of the Union of Polish Visual Artists, was signed by, i.a. Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz. The threat of the promotion in Poland of a basically totalitarian system of <u>protection</u> over art was prophetically noticed by Henryk Gotlib, whose article: *Faszystowska ofensywa na sztukę* warned against the danger created by the interventions of the authorities, the centralisation of artists' unions, and the "from above" administration of culture.²⁶

Another object of positive interest, apart from the Mediterranean model of protection for creators, was – and this might seem highly surprising from the ahistorical perspective of the twenty first century – Soviet Socialist Realism, treated as a stylistic emanation of a cultural policy. The first meeting of Polish artists and Socialist Realism took place not in 1949, but 16 years earlier. The "Exhibition of Soviet Art from the USSR", opened at the Institute of Art Propaganda in March 1933, inspired discussions about the place of the artist in society, the foundations of his existence, and the functions of art in changing reality. Waldemar Baraniewski wrote: In those discussions Socialist Realism assumes the form of an argument used in our disputes, one that does not propose solutions but is treated as acceptable. Potential approval of Socialist Realism was connected in particular with the artists' hope for gaining a suitable, in their opinion, social status.²⁷

It is impossible to place the Poland of Piłsudski alongside the Poland of Bierut, but collective behaviour characteristic for the latter did not come into being in a historical vacuum and was composed into the eternal scheme of relations between the patron and the client.

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Modernisation processes, for which it was indispensable to indicate an ideological context, were accompanied by undertakings that in times closer to us are described as politics of memory, and which in this case encompass townplanning complexes. The past, alongside the creation of projects of the ultimately non-emergent Warsaw, occupied a significant place in the vision of monumental Warsaw pictured by President Stefan Starzyński. 28 Warsaw possesses sufficient monuments, which require only serious effort to extract them from concealment and render them accessible to the population - Starzyński stated. Antoni Wieczorkiewicz, organiser of the Museum of Old Warsaw (today: Historical Museum of Warsaw) and a "Kurier Warszawski" journalist, was the promoter of the idea of revealing historical monuments and suggested lowering the terrain around palaces so as to optically slenderise the outlines of the latter. Another recommended method was the demolition of provincial houses or slums, the removal of newer architectural strata, and the reconstruction of older elements or entire buildings. The task presented to the Municipal Commission for Protection of Historical Monuments of Warsaw, established in 1935 as an advisory body assisting the President of the capital city, envisaged introducing order into the Old Town defensive walls after their disclosure. The re-Gothicisation of the church of the Holy Virgin Mary in the New Town, the accentuation of such Gothic relics as the façade of the Royal Castle revealed by Kazimierz Skórewicz or the above-mentioned defensive walls reconstructed until 1938 under the supervision of Zachwatowicz stressed the antiquity of Warsaw and legitimised the town's metropolitan character and status as a capital.²⁹

Historical architecture was a domain on which the authorities left the imprint of their creative ambitions. After the May 1926 coup d'état state authorities became increasingly interested in the symbolic building of the Royal Castle conceived as the Warsaw residence of President Ignacy Mościcki. Consequently, the needs for representation gradually dominated over conservation priorities guarded by the above-mentioned Kazimierz Skórewicz, whose approach towards postulates made by the Presidential entourage was not devoid of pragmatism. Ultimately, Skórewicz's place was taken by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz - an architect inclined to meet the demands of the authorities as well as to accept and apply a creative approach towards historical interiors as an expression of his artistic individualism. Should our restorer not be, above all, an artist? - he asked rhetorically. Should he not be concerned with placing in the restored building some sort of a memento of our culture and art for all eternity?³⁰

Already in 1915 Alfred Lauterbach's brochure: Potrzeby estetyczne Warszawy criticised tenements built at the turn of the nineteenth century, indicating that the height of houses in particular streets should be rendered uniform. In 1938 Jan Zachwatowicz, speaking at a convention of town planners held in Zamość, postulated the necessity of programming the functions of Old Town complexes envisaged as an element of a holistic town-planning project (the above-mentioned cleansing of mediaeval fortifications in the Warsaw Old Town was such an example). At a town-planning course organised in February 1939 by the Association of Polish Cities, Zachwatowicz publicly presented in his paper: Dzielnice i obiekty zabytkowe w planie zabudowy miast a conception of healing the streets of Warsaw, referring to the Lauterbach program. The revitalisation of historical areas was to consist of applying a holistic programme for façades within a single street; the style and height of buildings were to become uniform. Edifices facing the street were acknowledged as worthy of conservation protection, while outbuildings were to be pulled down so as to improve the living conditions of the residents, design courtyards, and introduce plants, as in the already post-war Nowy Świat Street.31

No country can afford the <u>luxury</u> of demolishing existing towns and raising new ones in their stead. This is not to say that plans, visions, and dreams do not emerge just in case such <u>luxury</u> was to become real. *One day Warsaw will be compelled to experience a period of demolition, just as Paris, Rome or other towns did* – wrote Starzyński, who in September 1939 managed to see beautiful Warsaw.³²

A photograph by Tadeusz Przypkowski, published in 1938 and featuring a fragment of the defensive walls of Warsaw, bore the caption: The second part of the bridge and the Barbican are enclosed by the house shown in the photograph, which should be torn down as soon as possible. Soon afterwards – as Grzegorz Piątek wrote – the pre-war campaign of revealing the past of the capital was accelerated (...) opening a field for shaping the image of Old Warsaw for architects and conservators alike.³³

The second Great War and its consequences

During peacetime between two world wars Bronisław Malinowski – one of the most outstanding social anthropologists – concluded that war could be of significance for the creation of culture. He was to change this opinion in the course of the Second World War, which proved to pose a special threat for culture without, however, ceasing to act as a consequence of that culture: by comprising a destructive element it provided creativity with conditions of *sui generis* cultural Darwinism.³⁴

The effects of World War II were the reasons why – as Carlo Ceschi wrote – the Athens Charter [conservation] and norms for the restoration of monuments became outdated. It was impossible to think about the preservation of only

that, which survived.³⁵ Another consequence of the War was the creation of conditions for the fulfilment of dreams about a better city of the future, cherished by architects and town planners alike.

In Poland wartime destruction became a generational challenge for representatives of the world of culture, an ethical and ideological call for rebuilding workshops and monuments of architecture in a political reality quite different than could be predicted while working in the structures of the Underground Polish State during the German occupation. It was also a time for becoming aware of the fact that due to wartime devastation entire domains of the national past would remain lifeless for always, and that in this context some of its documents, such as monuments of architecture, which can be recreated thanks to conservation undertakings, would become even more valuable. 36

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Table of contents 2018: https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/10809