

Warsaw and Nowa Huta – Two Examples of Socialist Monumentalism in Poland

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Socialist Realism existed in Poland during a short period, namely between 1949 and 1956. Just a few years before 1949, early visions for Warsaw as the new city had been visibly related to pre-World-War-Two modernism. In 1949, the communist party announced the new directions for art and architecture. A new doctrine was obligatory for all new buildings and simply related to Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union. This doctrine was obligatory in Poland until 1956.

The doctrine stipulated that the new architecture of a socialist Poland had to be “national in its form and socialist in its meaning”. Not all architects wanted to change the direction as they were not convinced of this doctrine – especially architects representing the pure ideas of the avant-garde. Architects who disagreed with these new rules had to stay out of the mainstream. Others could only work in the fields of interior design (Jan Bogusławski) and exhibition pavilions (Oskar Hansen, Jerzy Sołtan), or just stayed out of the creative process (Marek Leykam). Others such as Maciej Nowicki left Poland at the beginning of the 1950s.

All those who decided to follow the new doctrine had to agree with the programme, the narration and the neo-classical convention of the new style. Among them were creative modernists who had supported social housing in the 1920s and 1930s: Bohdan Lachert and Stanisław Brukalski. Others became part of the government or other authorities, like Roman Piotrowski, member of the avant-garde group “Praesens”, who was Minister of Construction from 1951 to 1956.

Many architects who decided to continue their career disagreed with the new concept of returning to neo-historic forms. They were trying to find their own, original way of architectural expression. It is interesting to observe how they were trying to get closer to the simple forms. Instead of classical columns they used rectangular pillars with flat architectural details as this was simpler (Fig. 1). It was common to use prefabricated systems that forced the simplification of forms. It is important to pay attention to details that are not purely historic, but were actually designed from the very beginning as a clear break with classical tradition.

The two examples which are presented here were started in the same year, just after the doctrine had appeared in 1949. They are the largest examples of Socialist Realism on the urban scale in Poland. They were both an important part of the propaganda that spoke of “new cities for the new socialist nation” and “new palaces for

our working-class heroes”.¹ Generally, the ideology of that style had positive connotations – in aesthetic dimensions, as a factor that consolidates society – except for the political meaning. Perhaps it is debatable but interesting to observe how all those former modernists used the historic forms as an inspiration.

Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa MDM (Marszałkowska Residential District 1949–1952) (Fig. 2), designed by Zygmunt Stepiński, Jan Knothe, Józef Sigalin, and Stanisław Jankowski, was located in the centre of Warsaw, on the axis of the main street Marszałkowska.²

Nowa Huta (Fig. 3) covered a much larger area near Krakow. It was designed in three stages: 1949 – 1950 – 1956 and was created by a large team of architects: Tadeusz Ptaszycki (as general designer), B. Skrzybalski, A. Foltyn, Z. Sieradzki, F. Adamski, J. Ingarden, M. Ingarden, and several others.³



Fig. 1: Simple detail of Socialist Realist architecture in Poland, MDM Warsaw



Fig. 2: Marszałkowska Residential District (MDM), Warsaw, south-eastern corner of Plac Konstytucji, Zygmunt Stepiański, Jan Knothe, Józef Sigalin and Stanisław Jankowski, 1949–1952



Fig. 3. Nowa Huta, Krakow, Aleja Róż, Tadeusz Ptaszycycki (and others), 1949 – 1950 – 1956



Fig. 4: Marszałkowska Residential District (MDM), Warsaw, Marszałkowska main axis

Urban structure

Marszałkowska Residential District (MDM) and Nowa Huta are totally different examples in their location context. MDM is situated in the mid-town area of southern Warsaw, in a former 19th century housing district. Nowa Huta was a new town erected outside Krakow as a residential base for the nearby Lenin Steelworks. In 1951 it was

incorporated into the city of Krakow and became a regular district of the city.

MDM adapted the existing structure of the city using the existing urban axis of Marszałkowska Street and the round city squares that were part of the neo-classical concept of Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last Polish King. Nowa Huta combines the idea of a Renaissance ideal city with elements of a garden city concept – a pentagonal square with



Fig. 5: Nowa Huta, Aleja Róż main axis

main axis (Aleja Róż) and four symmetrically arranged alleys. One of the alleys leads to the steelworks.

Plac Konstytucji (Constitution Square) (Fig. 2) is the centre of the MDM complex. The monumental structure also incorporated existing former urban fabric that had survived the war. The monumental square was located at the end of a wide avenue, the main street of the city (Marszałkowska Street) that existed before the war, but it was only half as wide. Originally, there were buildings with a more varied scale. During the implementation of the new Socialist Realist doctrine, it was extended twice. The construction scale was unified, partially preserving the eastern frontage. The remains of the western frontage were pulled down. In this way, the main axis of Socialist Realist Warsaw was created (Fig. 4).

Nowa Huta was divided into several districts. The earliest part of Nowa Huta (“Wandy” estate, 1949–50) was designed in forms similar to modernist social housing (Fig. 6). There was no historic detail here and the buildings were not based on an axial composition. These were extensive estates of multi-family buildings surrounded by greenery and recreational spaces. This means that the early genesis of Nowa Huta was based rather on the assumptions of the Athens Charter than on the doctrine of Socialist Realism. Later, from 1950, the directives of Socialist Realism introduced a new, monumental design for the subsequent housing blocks. At that time, an axial compositional project was established with the main axis (Aleja Róż) (Fig. 5) and a central square, Plac Centralny.

Some parts of the original concepts for Nowa Huta were never completed, for example a theatre on the southern



Fig. 6: Nowa Huta, the first housing estate “Wandy” showing references to the architecture of modernism, Franciszek Adamski, 1949–50

side of the central square and a town hall which was not required after incorporating the city into Krakow.

At the end of an eastern alley there is the Steelworks Administration Centre (Fig. 7), a main entrance to the factory and a public transport loop.

Architecture

The architecture of MDM and Nowa Huta has symbolic, stylistic and ideological similarities, both in the form of the facades as well as in the composition of the plans. The monumental forms symbolised the power of a nation and society. The architecture contains various historical references.



Fig. 7: Nowa Huta, Steelworks Administration Centre, Janusz Ballenstedt, Janusz Ingarden, Marta Ingarden, 1952–55



Fig. 8: Ludwika Nitschowa, “The Bricklayer” sculpture, MDM, Warsaw, 1952



Fig. 9: Hanna Żuławska, “Winter” mozaic in the arcades of Plac Konstytucji, Warsaw, 1952



Fig. 10: Ludwika Nitschowa, Adam Smolana, “Debating Architects” bas-relief at the front façade in Plac Konstytucji, Warsaw 1952

The Nowa Huta complex also contained cultural, educational, social and commercial infrastructures, for example cinemas, a theatre, schools, kindergartens, libraries, stores, cafeterias, bars and restaurants.

MDM as a prestigious residential district located in the centre of the capital was adjacent to the government administration buildings. The government district was a separate compound located outside the borders of MDM. However, both systems are closely related in that they have a similar architectural form, based on neo-classical detail and composition. The key role in planning the MDM, Nowa Huta and other Socialist Realist monumental complexes was played by President Bolesław Bierut. He was in office from 1947 until his death in 1956 under unclear circumstances during his stay in Moscow. After 1956, the process of reforming and liberalising the Communist ideology in Poland began. In the arts after that time, there was a shift towards abstraction and in design towards modern forms and international patterns. 1956 was the end of the Stalinist era and of Socialist Realism in Poland. Bierut personally supervised all the major construction sites throughout the country. He presented himself as a model host and a patron of new art and architecture.⁴

Decoration

MDM manifests much stronger ideological programmes relating to the Socrealist doctrine – especially in its “socialist meaning”. The working class became a new lyrical subject. For this reason, monumental sculptures (Fig. 8), mosaics and wall paintings were of such great importance in the narrative architectural function. The group of mosaics “Four Seasons” (Fig. 9) represents the narration of a labourer’s various activities during his annual cycle: work, parades, holiday. The six bas-reliefs at Constitution Square (Fig. 10) illustrate the phases of design and the construction processes: architects’ debates, selection of the architectural forms, discussions about the building models, brick-layers in their daily work, labourers cutting stones.

Nowa Huta showed different and much clearer narrations relating to the patronage of Lenin, which may be visibly compared to religious connotations. Most people in this working-class society retained their families’ Catholic traditions. Sometimes the narration is very similar to religious iconography in order to make the message clear and easy to understand. After 1989 Lenin’s monument was removed and is now kept in a private park of curiosities

in Sweden. Nowa Huta still contains many of its original handcrafted details. However, they gradually disappear in the course of building renovations.

Interiors

Today it is rare to find original interiors in MDM. Parts of original staircases have been preserved. They have very simple forms – adequate for the requirements of economical constructions as opposed to decorated facades.

Nowa Huta has retained one unique interior of the former “CEPELIA” and continues to sell handcrafted items. It is now owned by a former salesman who preserved the original function and interior design. Unfortunately, there is no support from local authorities. Owners have to rent part of the store in order to save their businesses.

Tradition vs. modernity

Ideologically, Socialist Realism was against the modernist movement, but there are some hidden modernist connotations nonetheless. A modernist approach can be seen in the extensive building layout, the location of services, the social programme, and the segregation of traffic in modern cities, as mentioned in the CIAM postulates. The urban fabric is composed as an extensive housing structure with social units in the middle of the quarters. The forms of many different Socrealist complexes in Warsaw do not even contain any of the historic details, orders, columns, pilasters, and cornices. The earliest estate of the Nowa Huta complex can easily be compared with modernist housing estates rather than with monumental avenues and squares (Fig. 5).

Final conclusion

Both MDM and Nowa Huta still have unique artistic, historic and scientific values as well as great potential for a complex conservation programme. The composition of these two spatial complexes reveals outstanding qualities characteristic of Socialist Realism in the architecture of the Eastern Bloc of the 1950s. The Polish examples, however, do not have such a large scale and such monumentality as analogous examples in Moscow, Minsk and Berlin. MDM more than Nowa Huta includes a programme of connecting the buildings artistically (through sculptures, reliefs and mosaics). The detail found in the Marszałkowska District of Housing, realised by leading Polish artists, has high artistic and craftsmanship quality.

These complexes are the most developed examples of the realisation of Socialist Realist ideas in Poland. They present a clearly defined urban composition, and architecture and detail are on a high artistic level. The state of conservation of MDM and Nowa Huta, however, raises some concerns. Without proper protection, the original details

may soon be lost, and the original layouts could be modified. The current scope of protection of MDM and Nowa Huta, restricted to their urban layouts, is certainly insufficient to also protect their details, articulation of forms and architecture.

- ¹ See also WŁODARCZYK, Socrealizm, 1991, p. 94.
- ² LEŚNIAKOWSKA, Architektura w Warszawie, 2003, p. 53.
- ³ BEIERSDORF / KOMOROWSKI, Nowa Huta, 2010, pp. 18, 20-21.
- ⁴ BARANIEWSKI, Architektura Warszawy, 2010, p. 49.

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Warschau und Nowa Huta – Zwei Beispiele für den sozialistischen Monumentalismus in Polen

Abstract

In der polnischen Architektur war der Sozialistische Realismus in seinem Umfang begrenzt; er war in anderen Ländern des Ostblocks viel stärker vertreten. Er kam in Polen erst 1949 auf und dauerte nur sechs Jahre. Die damals entstandenen architektonischen und städtebaulichen Komplexe waren von unterschiedlicher Größe und ergänzten oft bestehende Gebäude; in vielen Fällen wurden sie nur teilweise fertiggestellt. Der Aufsatz befasst sich mit zwei seltenen groß angelegten städtebaulichen Projekten, in Warschau und in Nowa Huta.