

# The Architectural Heritage of Socialist Realism in Warsaw

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German action during the Second World War led to the destruction of Warsaw on an unprecedented scale. Over the course of the five years of war more than 70% of the residential buildings in the city were demolished or burned down.\*

In January 1945, the first inhabitants to return to the ruins of Warsaw immediately began clearing the rubble. Within a month, an Office for the Reconstruction of the City had been set up and work commenced on recording all the damage incurred. In June of the same year, the Council of Ministers took a decision to rebuild the city. There were several concepts as to how to go about planning the post-war rebuilding and urban development of the capital, two of which were strong contenders. The first concept was that the ruined city should be reconstructed as faithfully as possible. The second – supported by influential people in government circles – proposed new developments in place of the devastated buildings, and the complete demolition of any remaining traces of the pre-war city. The concept of reconstructing pre-war Warsaw had to give way to visions of redevelopment. Nonetheless, it was decided that certain valuable examples of historical architecture be selected for preservation or reconstruction (among them, the Royal Route and the Old Town).

## The Marszałkowska Residential District (MDM). History and Ideology

The first projects to be undertaken reached back to pre-war styles of architecture: to Modernism, Functionalism, Monumentalism and also Neo-Historicism, which was a reaction to the destruction caused by the war. In the town centre district, modern office blocks and public buildings sprang up, inspired by the architectural trends of the time (like the Constructivist office blocks designed by Marek Leykam at 82 Marszałkowska Street, 4 Rakowiecka Street and 1 St. Barbara Street). Housing projects were also built in the modern style of the genre, typical for the inter-war period. New investments included outstanding projects which were a creative extension of worldwide avant-garde architecture (e.g. the Kolo housing estate, designed by Szymon and Helena Syrkus).

However, it was the injection of the ideology of socialist realism which had a deciding influence on the fabric of the new face of the city. According to its theoretical precepts formulated by Vladimir Lenin in 1905 the aim of art was “participation in events, mirroring of changes and recording of the new reality”. With the help of simple, understandable signs it was meant to influence the collective consciousness

of the people. Art, which should serve to reconstruct society, became the ideological tool of a totalitarian regime. Once it had swayed power over literature, painting and sculpture, the ideology of socialist realism began to make its mark on architecture.

Soviet theories concerning the role of architecture in furthering the ideology of socialist realism won the approval of the leadership of the Polish Communist Party, which had taken over power following the February elections in 1948. In the words of President Bolesław Bierut: “By its very nature, architecture creates buildings intended for long-term use. Architecture is a splendid embodiment of ideology. How better can we present our aims than through panoramas and models of new towns”.

According to the vision contained in the six-year plan for the rebuilding of Warsaw, signed by the president in 1950, new Warsaw was to become a city in the style of socialist realism. One of the priorities contained in the plan was the construction of a complex of housing estates in the very heart of the city. And it is for this reason that the proposed Marszałkowska Residential District (MDM) was based on the most important thoroughfare in the centre of the city – Marszałkowska Street.

The project was given to the “MDM” Studio team, led by architect Józef Sigalin. His main associates were Stanisław Jankowski, Jan Knothe and Zygmunt Stępiński. In May 1950, after just a few months of work, the team presented its first urban and architectural proposals for the entire district. It was stressed that this was the first time in the history of Warsaw that a total city project was being created in a planned and uniform manner on such a large scale.

The creators of the project took on board the traditional urban plan of the city in the composition of their development – and, in particular, the Stanisławowska Axis (a design created in the 18th century, based on a series of star-like squares). Marszałkowska Street, the main axis of the district, was widened on one side in the sector leading up to Constitution Square, retaining its old pre-war width to the south of the Square. The shape of Zbawiciela Square was retained, along with its church and numerous buildings. An exit from the corner of Constitution Square was created for a new artery (today’s Waryńskiego Street) which was to form an intersecting axis with the Stanisławowska Axis.

In view of the fact that the development was situated in an area with an existing historical urban fabric, the innovative design decisions inevitably affected the urban space. The formation of the new Square meant that the run and prioritisation of some streets had to be changed (Koszykowa, Piękna, and Sniadeckich Streets) and, in addition, that many

surviving grand city centre houses had to be demolished.

The functional programme of the proposed District envisaged the creation of 6,000 new homes, which were to house some 45,000 people. The planned homes were to be of an above-average standard; they were to have central heating, lifts, rubbish chutes, premises for prams, laundry rooms and drying rooms, and each apartment was to include gas cookers and bathroom boilers. In addition, the surrounding infrastructure was to include 10 creches, 22 nursery schools, 11 schools, 9 public health clinics, an indoor swimming pool and sports courts, a town hall, a Civic Militia precinct, a hotel, 5 theatres, 6 cinemas, and many shops and restaurants. Three underground metro stations were planned for the district.

The first stage of construction was to be Constitution Square and the surrounding area. Work commenced on 1 August 1950. The Square was designed in the form of a rectangle measuring 120 x 200 metres. The longer frontages were bordered with identical blocks containing a run of colonnaded arcades in which ground level shops with a mezzanine floor were installed. In the south of the Square the frontage was recessed, thus widening the Square and providing an exit to a newly created street (today's Waryńskiego Street). Located between this recess and Marszałkowska Street was a building containing the "MDM" Hotel. Blocks with identical arcades to those in the Square were built along Marszałkowska Street, in the direction of Zbawiciela Square. The complex known as MDM I (the sector between Wilcza Street and Zbawiciela Square) was commissioned on 22 July 1952 and built in record time.

The construction of MDM II, from Zbawiciela Square to Unia Lubelska Square, began at the same time as work on MDM I. In this sector, the former dimensions of Marszałkowska Street were retained, along with some of the original buildings. The scale and structural design of the new buildings blended well with the existing buildings but the



*Abb. 7: Der Platz am Ende der Winnie-Puuh-Achse wird architektonisch von einem Uhrturm, der an die Tradition städtischer Rathäuser anknüpft, dominiert. Die Gesamtanlage erinnert an die Marktplätze polnischer Städte*

*Fig. 7: The dominating architectural feature of the square which closes the axis of Kubusia Puchatka Street is the clock tower – an allusion to traditional town halls. The entire design brings to mind a typical Polish town square*

architectural design gave them a distinctly socialist realism style. From 1950 onwards, further buildings were erected in this sector; however, in view of the problems with supply of building materials, there was a delay in the completion of the elevations. The construction of MDM II, localised around Zbawiciela Square, was the last stage of the project.



*Abb. 8: „Weinlese“ – Flachrelief an der Gebäudefassade Ecke Wilcza-Straße und Marszałkowska-Straße (an der Ostseite) als Reklame des Weingeschäftes „Bacchus“*

*Fig. 8: The “Grape-picking” relief on the facade of a building at the corner of Wilcza and Marszałkowska Streets (on the eastern side) was an advertisement for the “Bacchus” wine shop*

The third phase of the MDM – the Latawiec Housing Estate – was constructed in the period 1953–56. Its main designer was Zofia Sekrecka. The form of the housing estate resulted from a desire to reconstruct and to emphasise the architectural style of the initial phase of the historical urban plan of the Stanisławowska Axis. The central part

of the estate – an elongated octagonal square located on the axis of Aleja Wyzwolenia – linked Zbawiciela Square with the Na Rozdrożu Square. The buildings forming its frontages are reminiscent of French architecture at the break of the 16th and 17th centuries (e.g. Place des Vosges in Paris).

This housing project was never fully completed. Neither all the proposed public buildings nor several housing blocks were actually built. Sculptures intended to adorn Constitution Square were never completed.

The buildings on the MDM abound with a wide variety of architectural detailing in the style of socialist realism. Modelled on classical and Renaissance styles, the buildings were adorned with projecting cornices or decorative friezes. In line with the mandatory principle of the “synthesis of art forms”, the architecture was embellished with an eclectic mix of monumental sculptures, reliefs, wrought ironwork, mosaics and sgraffiti. The final appearance was complemented by carefully designed street and square pavements as well as minor architectural elements, such as street lighting and landscape and greenery design. The residential estate was built with great panache providing a new face for Warsaw’s city centre.

The passage of time, long-term use and lack of regular, professional maintenance mean that today’s MDM has lost its original splendour. From an attractively located public space it has become a vehicle for advertising hoardings which conceal the richly decorated elevations and diffuse the natural composition of the facades. In addition, loft extensions dictated by a desire to make more economical use of the footprint of buildings in the city centre disturb the proportions of the buildings. Landscaping features have been neglected with the result that, instead of being simply an embellishment, the greenery frequently conceals the buildings from view.

The buildings and the entire MDM development deserve to be listed and put under the care of the Conservation Department as they are a model example, bearing all the characteristics of the genre, of the style of architecture and town planning typical of the socialist realism era.

## Urban planning

Under the principles of socialist realism the aim of urban planning was functionality and comprehensive spatial organisation, assuring dignified living conditions, access to culture, education, entertainment and leisure. The urban space was also meant to convey the monumentalism of the new order, ensuring that the people were aware that these modern streets, districts and towns – full of light and greenery – had

been built for the people by the one and only all-powerful socialist might. The splendid boulevards and squares were intended to provide a backdrop to grand state occasions such as parades and rallies.

The main criteria of the epoch was axial symmetry, and designers reached for historical models, planning developments on Baroque principles, concentrated around grand squares and wide boulevards.

## Architecture

The architecture of the epoch of socialist realism was faced with a challenge: the creation of a new, groundbreaking style which would counter the predominant post-war styles of cosmopolitanism, constructivism and formalism. This was to be the rebirth of a grand social architecture which was to be “socialist in expression and national in form”. Designers turned to the national architectural heritage for inspiration, and then adapted it. Facades were designed in accordance with classical principles. Elevations were decorated with attics, friezes and projecting cornices. Upper sections of pedestals were provided with ornamentation. Ground level arcades nestled behind long runs of colonnades. Other artistic forms were incorporated: painting, sculpture and ornamental ironwork. A synthesis of the arts was considered to be one of the basic precepts of the new style.

## Detailing

This delving into historical forms was mirrored in the richness of architectural detailing on the elevations of buildings constructed in the socialist realism style, which were often endowed with over-exaggerated proportions. Inspiration was taken from the past (Renaissance, Baroque or Neo-Classicism) and was also seen in the ornamentation (pilasters, balustrades, terraces, balconies, cornices, arcades, attics, galleries, caissons, ceramics, sgraffiti and mosaics), as well as in the thematic motifs of the stone, mosaic or ironwork detailing. New themes appeared, too, showing the life of working people; labourers, miners, steelworkers and bricklayers became the heroes of the monumental sculptures adorning the buildings of the socialist realism era.

\* With friendly permission by Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation, from: “SocRealismus. – The Architectural Heritage of Warsaw and Berlin: Marszałkowska

Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa (MDM) and Karl-Marx-Allee (KMA)”. Exhibition Catalogue History Meeting House Warsaw (Dom Spotkań z Historią – DSH), 2011.