

# The Architectural and Urban Heritage of Socialist Realism in Warsaw – an Approach for Evaluation and Conservation

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Socialist-realist urban complexes and buildings as documents of a past epoch are consistent with the legal definition of a monument. Yet, the preservation of socialist-realist heritage in the modern socio-economical situation and contemporary urban context is problematic. In reality, very often there is a lack of social awareness of its historic significance as monuments. In spite of the time distance of the epoch, the strong semantic layer of the socialist-realist architecture causes that it is generally associated with the repressive communist era. The legitimacy of conserving and preserving these buildings is still questioned. On the other hand, we can observe a growing interest in the subject. In recent years, Socialist Realism has become a subject of scientific research. Furthermore, many examples of socialist-realist sites increasingly have the potential as tourist highlights, which is specific for post-communist countries. Taking into consideration that there is a risk of lacking appreciation of Socialist Realism and the obligation to conserve the architectural heritage for future generations, conservation institutions are facing a serious challenge that requires a particular approach.

## 1. Socialist Realism – definition and theory

Socialist Realism originally was not a style but an imposed, artistic method, defined as “socialist in content and national in form”, officially sanctioned in the Soviet Union in 1934. The doctrine defined basic categories for the arts: connection with the party, typicality and national form. One of the main requirements was a synthesis of the arts in order to create a new social order. The pressure of the doctrine was not equal and depended on the position in the hierarchy of the arts. Architecture as a medium creating living space for the people was the main field of ideology. Socialist architecture was to break with modernism identified with formalism, schematism and counter-urbanization. In order to create a proper expression of architecture, it was required to achieve a national tradition. Architects and urban planners defined as “engineers of the human souls” were restricted by the limits of the doctrine and by organizational structures.

## 2. Time frames

The period of Socialist Realism in Polish architecture is relatively short and can be described by two consultations of the authorities with the architectural circle:

- **20–21 June 1949** – National Conference of the Party Architects, official acceptance of Socialist Realism as “the only correct artistic method”;
- **26–28 March 1956** – All-Polish Architects Meeting – criticism of architecture and urban planning of 1949–1955, official decision to reject Socialist Realism.

In spite of the short duration of the period, Socialist Realism had a great influence on the appearance of many parts of Polish cities. In the area of Warsaw it occurred in a specific moment of reconstruction after the damages of the Second World War, becoming at the same time an important part of the city’s cultural landscape.

## 3. Theory in practice

Although the socialist-realist doctrine did not determine an obligatory set of formal features, a comparative analysis allows defining common principles for the shaping of the urban space, the handling of proportions and the scale of the buildings, their details and building technologies.

### 3.1. Urban planning

In the urban planning symmetrical, geometrical arrangements are used, very often based on the baroque idea of space. In spite of the doctrinal anti-modernism of the method, very often we can observe an aprioristic thinking about the space, denying the urban context of the site. On the other hand, many of the socialist-realist urban complexes are applied to historical urban arrangements.

### 3.2. Architecture

The architecture is characterized by monumental forms. Reference to neo-classical forms is dominating. The idea of a synthesis of the arts is exemplified by a combination of urban and architectural planning and decorative design (use of different decorative techniques, complex design: street furniture, interiors etc, and also green arrangements).

### 3.3. Detail

The aesthetic sphere of the architecture is an element of ideological content. There is a set of repetitive motifs among

the architectural elements and details. Details are the main manifestations of “national form”. A characteristic feature is a simplification and stylization of the forms, accomplishing the requirement of the typicality. An important aspect is the mechanism of “self-criticism” of the architects adjusting the projects to the requirements of the doctrine. In consequence, very often we are dealing with a building or complex characterized by a modernist planning with applied socialist-realist detail.

### 3.4. Building technologies

The building technologies are traditional and connected with the poor economic situation in the period of post-war reconstruction. The particularity of the specific period very often manifests itself in the usage of demolition materials: rubble bricks, demolition bricks, etc. At the same time we can observe the dynamic character of the doctrine – prefabrication used for economic reasons is connected with the requirement of typicality. On the other hand, for the most representational projects high-quality materials and handcraft techniques are used.

## 4. Identification of the cultural significance of the architecture of Socialist Realism

Taking into consideration the specificity of Socialist Realism, the accepted assessment criteria for the evaluation of 20th-century architecture can be used only in a certain range. The merit of innovative modern technologies cannot be applied. Nevertheless, in this context the reuse of demolition material can have a historical value. Only in a certain range we can use the merit of esteem of the contemporaries, while the art criticism of the era was strongly ideological. Regarding the strong semantic layer of the buildings, their historical value is still charged with the negative connotations of the socialist epoch.

The assessment of socialist realist architecture should be based on the recognition of its artistic values manifested in the urban planning, the scale of the buildings, their detail and in the application of the idea of a synthesis of the arts, visible in the total approach to design. The analysis of the tangible attributes should be connected with the recognition of the intangible values, manifested in the buildings' context.

## 5. Set of categories characteristic of Socialist-Realist planning and design principles based on the assessment of the significance of buildings and urban complexes

### 5.1. Assessment of the artistic value

#### a) Urban merit

– Urban planning (connected with historic value and merit of the context):

- Breaking with the tradition and historic context of the site (PKIN)
- Preservation of the relations with the urban context of the site (MDM)
- Creation of completely new urban contexts (Pl. Hallera)
- Symmetrical and axial character of the urban complexes (typology of arrangements: geometrical, linear, etc)

- The scale of the complex depending on the function (housing estate, seat of authorities, site of propaganda gatherings, etc)
- Green areas as an important part of the design
- City furniture

#### b) Architectural merit

- Composition, handling of proportion, scale
- Detail – the main manifestation of the national form, wide range of forms and stylistic references (Renaissance, baroque, classicism, art deco, etc), variety of techniques (relief, architectural sculpture, mosaic, sgraffito, polychromy, etc)
- Materials, techniques, methods (for example: experimental rubble brick, demolition brick, methods to speed up the process at the building site)
- Interior design

### 5.2. Assessment of the historic value

#### a) Context merit

- Analysis of the context of the site
- Analysis of the context of the project – attitude towards the doctrine etc.

#### b) Symbolic merit

- Function of the building/complex
- Semantic layer
- Connection with important events, people, etc.

### 5.3. Superior values

#### a) Integrity

- Original design

#### b) Exceptionality

- For example: value of a role model (model housing estate, etc.)

| Integrity           |                |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Exceptionality      |                |
| Artistic value      | Historic value |
| Urban merit         | Context merit  |
| Architectural merit | Symbolic merit |



## 6. Fundamental conservation problems – loss of authenticity and integrity

- Economical aspect of post-war reconstruction, poor quality of aging materials, endangered detail (thermo-modernisation).
- How to preserve the original urban layout from the town planner's point of view. Individually, many buildings may not be very prominent architecturally, yet together they create a unity of urban and socio-cultural value.
- Loss of economic values of large-scale monuments – challenge to find new functions for the buildings and adapting them to new socio-economic conditions.

- Social value of the architecture as one of the most important distinctive features of Socialist Realism; challenge to maintain the original functions of buildings such as schools, kindergartens, cinemas, theatres, community centres, etc.
- The question how to preserve the socialist-realist “costume” applied to buildings after the architects’ “self-criticism” (applied detail)

## 7. Over local Value of Socialist Realism

Socialist Realism as an artistic canon of coherent formal features and strong semantic layers is an important component of the cultural landscape of post-communist cities. There is a challenge for researchers to find the most representative examples of architecture and to define the common, repetitive types of buildings and urban complexes (for example Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa Warsaw/MDM or Karl-Marx-Avenue Berlin/KMA).

### Zusammenfassung

## Das architektonische und städtebauliche Erbe des sozialistischen Realismus in Warschau – eine Annäherung zur Beurteilung und Erhaltung

Stadtanlagen und Gebäude des sozialistischen Realismus als Dokumente einer zurückliegenden Epoche entsprechen der rechtlichen Definition eines Denkmals. Dennoch ist der Erhalt dieses Erbes in der heutigen sozio-ökonomischen Situation und im zeitgenössischen städtischen Kontext problematisch. In der Realität besteht oftmals ein Mangel an Bewusstsein für die historische Bedeutung derartiger Bauten. Trotz des zeitlichen Abstands führt die dominante semantische Schicht der sozialistisch-realistischen Architektur dazu, dass sie generell mit der repressiven kommunistischen Ära in Verbindung gebracht wird, so dass die Erhaltung noch immer infrage gestellt wird. Andererseits ist aber auch ein wachsendes Interesse an diesem Thema zu beobachten: Der sozialistische Realismus wird wissenschaftlich erforscht und viele bauliche Beispiele haben das Potenzial als touristische Highlights. Angesichts der Tatsache, dass der sozialistische Realismus Gefahr läuft, nicht genügend wertgeschätzt zu werden und der Verpflichtung, das bauliche Erbe für zukünftige Generationen zu erhalten, sind Denkmalpflegeinstitutionen mit einer ernsthaften Herausforderung konfrontiert, die eine besondere Herangehensweise erfordert.

Der Beitrag liefert eine Definition des Begriffs „sozialistischer Realismus“ und seinen theoretischen Überbau, benennt den zeitlichen Rahmen dieses „Stils“ in Polen und die charakteristischen Elemente der Architektur, der Bautechniken und der Fassadengestaltung. Darüber hinaus fasst er die wichtigsten Konservierungsprobleme, vor allem den drohenden Verlust von Authentizität und Integrität, zusammen.