

The Historic Urban Landscape as a Record of Political History

The historical landscape that we observe as a sequence of pictures has its base in the changing political and economic history as well as civilizational level of inhabitants. Obviously, there are other factors that have an impact on the city landscape, including climate and, especially in the past, accessibility of local building materials. I would like to pause for a moment on the influence of political history on the cityscape.

Democratic systems, regardless of time and place, usually operate using small urban structures, guarantying appropriate scale as well as building and public space location. Among cities built in this way I would include the cities of Ancient Greece and those of Medieval and Renaissance Europe. The basis for their building was local law that was clear and applied to all. Public space, including public buildings and facilities serving religion, culture, and education, has a defined place. Housing space, also built in accordance with defined rules, remained the sphere of the individual and was not subordinated to politics or religion. Similar features are also found in modern European cities starting with the 19th century. There, rules governing building were clearly defined. However, the economic and civilizational boom in cities of that time resulted in a multitude of extremely unfavorable investment phenomena. It was this period that saw the uncontrolled sprawl of cities, increased concentration, and the raising of ever-higher structures for no purpose other than to generate profit.

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Absolutist and totalitarian systems made their own rules that were, in a sense, above the law. Those systems created cities with monumental spatial designs, mainly for the purpose of self-glorification. The first such system in Europe was Ancient Rome. Subsequently, those extremely enlightened 18th century rulers and architects, in implementing the laudable ideas of putting cities in order and composing them, ruthlessly destroyed the urban layouts they found. An excellent example of such effort is the reconstruction of Paris by Georges Haussmann as early as the 19th century. Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon's nephew, who for formal reasons could not be democratically elected for a successive term, announced himself emperor in 1852. As Napoleon III he decided to implement his own vision of a spacious, healthy, and modern Paris. Coming from Bordeaux, Haussmann became the mayor of Paris in 1853. The scale of demolition work and new regulated street layouts was enormous, stirring enormous protests in its turn. He was recalled in 1870, but the reconstruction of the city in line with his principles continued up to 1927. It was then that Haussmann Boulevard was built. Inspired by different reasons, but with a similar destructive effect on existing building tissue, were Fascist designs in Germany and Italy.

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Such activities made their appearance in our, eastern part of Europe following World War II and were linked to the introduction of the utopian ideas of socialism. In theory, socialism made reference to democracy. However, in reality it had nothing in common. It was the political apparatus that knew what inhabitants needed, how they should live, work, and spend their free time. Monumental spatial layouts destroying the historical tissue of the city—the existing cityscape—were built under the banners of egalitarianism, the apotheosis of hard work, and social justice. Wartime

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destruction of cities and the need to rebuild them were used as justification. Examples include Warsaw's MDM Marszałkowska Housing District and Berlin's Karl Marx Alee. As can be seen on areal photographs, the dense tissue of the streets of what is known as the "Stanislaus Kite" was undestroyed, yet it was here that the most monumental urban design of the capital was built.

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In Warsaw as well as in many other cities, especially in western Poland, a single political decision was sufficient. A special legal act known as the "Bierut Decree" (after the name of the then residing president of the country) was issued in October of 1945. It passed all land within the prewar limits of Warsaw to the State Treasury. Apart from the injustice of this "takeover" with respect to current property owners, it did make possible the liberal use of land and buildings by the authorities. This capacity to ignore ownership rights, as they existed provided an opportunity for the rapid undertaking of reconstruction. Representatives of the new communist authorities determined the shape of reconstruction without any regard for the historical structure of the city.

This opened the way for land management in line with the will and vision of those in power. The Palace of Culture and Science Building as well as the MDM Marszałkowska Housing District were built on the rubble of the historical city. Even in the case of slogans regarding the reconstruction of the historical city, it was not rebuilt in line with historical property lines and preserved documentation. This applies to the Old and New Towns as well as the Royal Road. In reconstruction of historical character, some buildings were not rebuilt on purpose. This was the case with respect to the surroundings of the Old Town that uncovered and partially reconstructed relics of the Old Town defensive walls and revealed the

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escarpment from the river, thus providing an appropriate panorama. The truth is that this provided a unique romantic creation that had never existed in the past. In order to produce this creation it was not only necessary to take decisions to not rebuild some buildings, often monumental and interesting, but also take decisions regarding the demolition of buildings that were only damaged, not destroyed.

A somewhat different principle of reconstruction was in force on the edges of the New Town as well as the Krakowskie Przedmieście [Cracow Faubourg] and Mariensztat, adjacent to the Old Town. Both the urban layout and buildings made only a relatively loose reference to their historical models. What was preserved was the layout of the streets and principles governing the building of the street fronts. The designer made excellent use of location on the escarpment as well as vegetation as an architectural material to open up vistas onto the historical buildings of the escarpment's crown.

Exceptionally successful is the cozy housing estate to the west of Nowy Świat Street designed by Zygmunt Stępiński and built over the years 1949–56. However, it was made possible at the cost of historical buildings since what was rebuilt in the case of Nowy Świat Street was only the buildings lining it, without numerous wings and annex buildings. Historical property lines were also eradicated and the area behind the buildings provided space for completely new compositions.

The return of Poland to the road of democracy in 1989 forced us all to ask questions and seek answers on how to approach the difficult heritage of the postwar period. Pursuant to the law and when possible, real estate seized after 1945 should be returned to former owners, which is the position

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taken by the courts. Unfortunately, no act governing reprivatization was passed in Poland. How can this be reconciled with the new development designed and built seventy years ago that in no way respects earlier ownership subdivisions? Can a part of a school, park, or government building be returned? If it is feasible, then what new development is possible on these newly created lots? Should we protect that which has been partially destroyed and rebuilt as the historical cityscape or should we protect that which was built in the postwar period, but which is often questioned in terms of its aesthetics and morality?

Putting aside successive moral questions regarding the taking of school grounds or public parks in order to return them to their former owners (who often surrender their claims in order to be free of problems) who, *nota bene*, are incapable of independently managing the property and therefore sell it to strong developers with commercial objectives, there remains the dilemma of how to proceed in these cases. All heritage protection doctrines recommend the protection of all historical layers, where changes can only be introduced where necessary while simultaneously reflecting our own times. Such a heritage protection position is being seriously attacked in Warsaw, which is the reason behind an enduring longing for the reconstruction of what is known as the Saxon Palace, destroyed during the war. What is more, socially active communities are pushing for the reconstruction of the Karaś Palace in its historical form on Krakowskie Przedmieście [Cracow Faubourg]. Neither the Saxon nor Karaś palaces represented high-quality buildings, while the building up of a site near the Old Town using a contemporary form stirred up an international storm. On the other hand, the rebuilding of the

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northern square front of Theater Square on a site left vacant and turned into a park in the postwar period demonstrates the fiction of such thinking.

As mentioned, the older generation, in its bulk, does not accept Socialist Realism building (the Palace of Culture and Science Building, for example), the younger generation would wish the reconstruction of prewar Warsaw that they see in a highly idealized version, former owners would like to have their property returned so they can use it commercially. Currently, out of approximately 40,000 claims only a handful has been successful, but this shows the dangers of such actions. I will show three examples. The first is a site on Bugaj Street on the Old Town escarpment. As mentioned, buildings on the whole of the escarpment were not reconstructed on purpose. The return of a lot that had been a part of an area of organized vegetation for years is the subject to efforts at building it up. The former owners make reference to the fact that a house stood on this site prior to the war. Fortunately, defense of this lot against building has proved successful to date. A lot in the middle of an open quarter in the Mariensztat District was not as fortunate. It was built up at odds with the principles of this ordered housing estate that was designed after the war, as mentioned. A school is located nearby in the former River Toll Chamber. A gym hall was built behind it in the Socialist Realism style, including a sports field. The lot has been regained by the University of Warsaw, which intends to demolish the gym hall and erect one of its departments in its place as well as on the sports field.

Being democratic, the present system does not prejudge just what solution should be applied. However, there exists the very serious threat that pure chance will define our cityscape. There is no way of knowing just which

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lots shall be returned and if sentiments with respect to the prewar city, a disdain for Socialist Realism, or the simple desire for profit will come to the forefront. It would seem that those responsible for the spatial shape of the city should receive the tools needed to block certain reprivatizations (legislation has been submitted to the Polish Parliament making possible the right of first refusal by the city), and respecting and continuing the development of spatial layouts of high quality (similarly to how Haussmann's concepts were continued in Paris for several decades), including those created after the war as well as requirements that the architecture have contemporary qualities and not be a historical copy.

The next generation will see what manner of cityscape makes its appearance as a result of historical and political whirlwinds. I continue to be hopeful that it will be one that is worth protecting.