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Jana Fuchs: Städtebau und Legitimation

After the Nazi annihilation of Warsaw, the communist regime's patriotic campaign "the whole nation builds its capital" garnered much popular support. Scholarly output on Warsaw's reconstruction has been dense, and Warsaw's old town regularly dominates analyses as the epicenter of the so-called Polish School of Conservation. Here, General Conservator Jan Zachwatowicz spearheaded idealized replicas of streetscapes which the Nazis had destroyed, as suited his motto "a nation only lives as long as its cultural possessions live." (60) As Małgorzata Popiolek demonstrates in her 2017 TU Berlin dissertation, Zachwatowicz's nationalist idealization of Warsaw's medieval and early modern "golden age" had already begun in the interwar period. [1] Arnold Bartetzky's research further uncovers how Polish efforts to forge a homogenous national narrative in architecture had interwar roots, not least with the creation of an enormous square - later called Plac Zwycięstwa - through the willful decimation of Poland's largest Russian Orthodox church as a heritage of Russian occupation. [2] A veritable library of further scholarship illustrates how postwar decisions in the capital had profound implications for how fanciful replicas were implemented alongside sweeping modernization in formerly German cities such as Gdańsk, Wrocław, and Szczecin.

The thesis in such prior scholarship that "sites and spaces" help to determine social and political contexts deeply informs Jana Fuchs's revised 2018 dissertation, which focuses on two adjacent squares in the less studied region situated between Warsaw's old town and Socialist Realist showpieces such as Muranów or the towering Palace of Culture and Science. Both Plac Zwycięstwa and Plac Teatralny had constituted centers of public life in interwar Warsaw that took on contrasting connotations after 1945- the former as a seat of Nazi rule, the latter as the headquarters of resistance (in the city hall) during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Claiming that both spaces were left largely unbuilt under communism, Fuchs argues that they nonetheless attracted "an astounding measure of criticism and accordingly numerous collisions between the official narrative and public perception and the actions of other players." (4) From 1945 to 1989, a grand total of six plans for Plac Zwycięstwa and four for Plac Teatralny circulated; though little from these plans was realized, Fuchs effectively shows that "absence" was hardly the result. Plac Zwycięstwa was immediately redeemed from its Nazi-era opprobrium as "Adolf-Hitler-Platz" through the reconsecration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It was an emblem of national martyrdom made even more poignant as it survived in an arcade fragment of the Saxon Palace, which was otherwise destroyed like the rest of the square. Meanwhile, the neighboring Plac Teatralny hosted a Stalinist mega-project-the new Great Theater - dwarfed only by the nearby Stalinist Palace of Culture and Science skyscraper. Across the square, the 1964 unveiling of a Warsaw Uprising monument on the site of the former city hall generated enormous commemorative power.

Fuchs researches "absence" by delving into a wide array of Warsaw archives at the national and local levels, and ventures to the French diplomatic archive in Paris to underpin her analysis of plans for a French embassy on Plac Zwycięstwa. Particularly important are periodical sources, whose letters to the editor and questionnaires cannot reconstruct what Warsawians actually thought at the time, but can reveal "what one could express in public and what degree of critique was possible." (29)

Organizing her analysis along the standard political chronology of Cold War Poland, Fuchs follows her introduction with a second chapter that assesses how ruins inspired reconstruction - both in terms of prewar continuities and utopian visions. This recalls Jerzy Elżanowski's claim that ruins stimulated Warsawians' postwar imaginary. [3] Zygmunt Stępiński, the architect who restored the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on the Plac Zwycięstwa, evoked how ruins could forge postwar identity. As he later wrote, "for me it was about bestowing on this ruin, which is a symbol of the martyrdom of the Polish people and an authentic

fragment of the destroyed Warsaw, the form of a permanent architectural sculpture." (75) The result was a ruin that in many ways possessed greater poignancy than any potential replica of the prewar palace.

The third chapter explores Stalinist plans from 1949 to 1956, which fashioned a new central square before the freshly completed Palace of Culture and Science in place of ordinary neighborhoods whose total erasure made them nostalgic domains of loss for former residents. Far from utterly languishing, however, Warsaw's onetime main square at Plac Teatralny received a new Great Theater, whose Socialist Realist grandeur was designed by architects who had momentarily converted from modernism-a trend comparable to other East Bloc cities of the time. Chapter four covers the Gomułka era (1956-1970), when the 1964 planning decision to place a memorial to the Warsaw Uprising on the site of the cleared city hall ruin was "accepted by part of the population," but provoked some to call for a reconstruction of the city hall to more authentically represent where the Uprising had been plotted (209).

Although extensive planning yielded few outcomes on either square in the 1970s or 1980s, chapter five highlights how a fresh infusion of historical significance gave each square even greater commemorative weight, notably as Plac Zwycięstwa served as the site for Pope John Paul II's 1979 Mass, 1980s Solidarity protests, and crackdowns. The conclusion sketches how Plac Zwycięstwa (once again called Pilsudski Square) has become a space for post-communist commemorative markers: the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier now faces both a giant cross in honor of the Pope's 1979 Mass and a black stairway-like memorial to the victims of the 2010 plane crash near Smolensk. On Plac Teatralny, meanwhile, postcommunist authorities expelled the Warsaw Uprising monument to a traffic interchange in order to make way for a replica of the vanished city hall, whose investor and occupant is an international bank - a phenomenon of capitalist replica production that brings to mind the palace shopping mall in Braunschweig among many other potential parallels. As David Crowley observes in his classic 2003 analysis of Warsaw's reconstruction, the "unremarkable office building housing Citibank's headquarters" makes the city hall on Plac Teatralny a "Potemkin village" that "can only be read as a gesture" to the former city. [4]

Although Fuchs promises to balance political and planning elites with public voices, ordinary Warsawians most commonly appear in her book as a silent mass in the photos. Given limitations in the available sources, this may well have been an unavoidable outcome. Fuchs has nonetheless offered a lucid and densely researched microstudy of urban planning and commemorative discourse amid ever shifting plans for two squares in communist Warsaw. Drawing out numerous pearls from deep archival and periodical research, this book should interest scholars of postwar reconstruction more broadly. After all, Fuchs's detailed examples of two main squares in Warsaw speak to planning quandaries and outcomes that unfolded on central squares in numerous East Bloc cities.

Notes:

[1] Małgorzata Popiołek-Rosskamp: Warschau. Ein Wiederaufbau, der vor dem Krieg begann, Paderborn 2020.

[2] See for instance Arnold Bartetzky: History Revised. National Style and National Heritage in Polish Architecture and Monument Protection before and after World War II, in: Heritage, Ideology, and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe, ed. by Matthew Rampley, Woodbridge 2012, 93-113.

[3] Jerzy Elżanowski: Manufacturing Ruins. Architecture and Representation in Post-Catastrophic Warsaw, in: The Journal of Architecture 15 (2010), 1, 71-86.

[4] David Crowley: Warsaw, London 2003, 88.

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Rezension von:

Andrew Demshuk
American University, Washington, DC

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