

Contemporary Polish architecture

From one paradigm to another, or from nowhere to nowhere

by Bolesław Stelmach

*Paradigm, (from Greek παράδειγμα *parádeigma* – “example, pattern”)*

1. Communist paradigm

After 1949, the rule of Communist dictatorship began in Poland. For architects, this meant the ideologization of space. Consecutive stages of the dictatorship first brought the need to follow, in practice, the theory of socialist realism – which in fact constituted a set of vague principles rather than theories. Nevertheless, the latter were dogmatically implemented by architects-cum-party-ideologues, with painful consequences for those who rebelled against them. Soon after, there followed a model of shaping space in the State that was building socialism, which forced the extreme frugality in the construction process, including the idea for one shared toilet per a dozen or so flats, located on the first floor of a communal residential block.

In the context of construction paradigm, the years 1956 – 1989 constitute a particularly interesting and contradictory period. In those years, we can talk about “socialist modernism” – both in its program and its aesthetic sphere explicitly referring to Western European culture, albeit shaped by the realities of socialism.

The decades to follow have imposed a model of prefabricated housing construction, where prefabricated elements were produced centrally, in large “house-factories”, imported from the USSR. Each of these space transformation models only deepened the deficit of housing and services. Since the end of World War II in Poland, there had been a permanent shortage of between 1 and 2 million flats, depending on the demographic situation. The role of architects was reduced to either the providers of socialist realist images, or one group of construction industry staff who adapted objects from prefabricated house-factory catalogue to the local needs.

In the years 1946-1989, Polish architecture and urban planning was subordinated to political decisions, but it was also subject to architectural vogues. Having said that, the succession of “isms” (modernism, international style, postmodernism, deconstructivism) had an impact on the form of urban planning and architecture, but not on the social anchoring of the architectural discipline or on its popular reception and role in society.

If we can talk about one specific paradigm throughout the whole period, it would certainly be the set of values that we came to describe as the humanism of space. In theory, humanistic principles of transforming space were imposed by the ruling ideology. In practice, construction in Poland was as far removed from human needs as the so-called People’s (socialist) democracy was from actual democracy. In the ideological bureaucracy – one that ruled totally and without exception – it was only in exceptional cases that construction met the needs of the residents, and the architects were able to create a valuable, human space. The norm was to build expensive and ugly houses of extremely poor quality, and that was because of typical prefabricated system. Across Poland, identical 4-storey blocks of flats (with no elevator) and 10-storey blocks of flats (with a lift) were being constructed. Service amenities were not being built, because profitability ratios favoured multi-family construction, therefore services were unprofitable for designers and contractors. All that reality was fashioned by a system of centrally imposed master plans, necessarily creating the “shortage economy”. As Kisiel (Stefan Kisielewski) has put it: communism was a system that created problems, which it then proceeded to fight, heroically and unsuccessfully. This was the case with the transformation of space, with the construction of housing and service amenities, with the development of cities and technical and social infrastructure. The resultant spatial effect was perhaps best described in the statement by architect Jerzy Gurawski: “Wherever I go, I am in Konin.”

Also in the sphere of work skills and tools, the oppressive system did not allow the architect to “be the most important person on the construction site” (from Greek *Architecton*). A complicated, hierarchical system of projects’ approval and implementation separated the architect from his work by means of a bureaucratic wall. Bureaucratic plans, norms, standards, technologies, coefficients, commissions made the decisions – but not the architect.

Of course, there were exceptions – that proved the rule – there were some remarkable architectural and urban-planning works created by outstanding architects, but these went against the official model, against the paradigm. The paradigm is a theoretical model, the realization of which confirms the adopted assumptions. Urbanism and architecture were to serve the people – in theory. In practice, they chiefly served the communist bureaucracy.

Throughout that period, outstanding works rarely appeared – standing out due to the type of investment, the investor, or the outstanding creators. These included, among others, Dom Partii – Headquarters of the Communist Party (by “Tygrysy”), “Spodek” – the “Saucer” arena in Katowice (by M. Gintowt, M. Krasiński, and J. Hryniewiecki) The Eastern Wall in Warsaw (by professor Z. Karpiński and J. Klewin), and “Okrągłak” rotunda in Poznań (M. Leykam).

Another outstanding architectural work created despite the system is undoubtedly the “Manhattan at Grunwaldzki Square” in Wrocław. The author, architect Hawrylak-Grabowska, designed a complex of 54-meter high residential towers with commercial and service pavilions, which she equipped with greenery and vines on the roofs, and balconies finished with wood and clinker bricks. In the author’s intent, the white residential towers against the contrasting greenery were supposed to bring associations with the atmosphere of Mediterranean cities.

The characteristic, oval-shaped concrete prefabricated elements were the work of Jadwiga Hawrylak-Grabowska’s talent, championed by a friend of the architect’s family, who helped in obtaining the aluminium castings, which were then unique throughout the countries of the socialist block, and yet indispensable to produce such individual and atypical prefabricated forms. The architect had to apply for special permission in the appropriate ministry in Warsaw, in order to be allowed to use such an unusual solution.

The frugality imposed by the municipal authorities and then by the housing cooperative (the investor) reduced both the costs and the functional values of the buildings to the bare minimum. The raw, concrete, heroic appearance of these houses, which until recently – that is, until their thermo-modernization – aroused such admiration among critics and devotees of architecture in Poland and around the world, was in fact the result of

unfinished work. Its heroic brutality resulted from the inefficiency of the communist system, from a practice that denied the ideology and theory of the communist system.

The fate of “Wrocław’s Manhattan” is a kind of allegory of the “communist paradigm”. The implementation of this “planned architecture and urbanism in the service of the people” had as much to do with the theory as the bare and brutal minimum, stripped of everything that went beyond the economic and organizational minimum imposed “at the top”, had to do with the vision of “Mediterranean white towers in green.”

2. Capitalist paradigm

Things are really no different in the case of the model that has been governing since 1989 – beginning with the fall of communism. Almost overnight, architecture and urban planning have become commodities and fashion objects, with all the consequences of that fact. Ethical principles that defined the mission of architects in the period of 1918-1939, when Poland regained its statehood after 150 years of captivity – principles recorded by Lech Niemojewski in his book “Uczniowie cieśli” (“Carpenter’s Disciples”, 1948) – suddenly seemed dated and obsolete. The slogan: “Architecture in the service of the people” has been replaced by another: architecture in the service of profit. The model of capitalism introduced by neo-liberal political circles envisaged profit through speculation rather than through production. The role of architects has therefore been reduced to increasing the value of the land.

The State completely withdrew from influencing the transformation of space. During communism, cities were planned down to the smallest detail, then implemented inconsistently with those plans, and most often nothing was ever accomplished other than typical blocks of flats. Capitalism virtually eliminated urban planning, subordinating the latter to the interests of real estate speculators. For 30 years, the shape of city spaces was determined by the lobby of large energy distribution companies, by the lobby of passenger cars, or by private owners of extremely fragmented land. All these phenomena resulted in uncontrolled urban sprawl of extremely energy-consuming, toxic, and amorphous cities. In huge, newly built complexes of multi-family housing (2-5 thousand inhabitants), there is no

social or recreational infrastructure, nor is there public space. Green areas in cities – squares and fragments of parks – are also swallowed by new construction.

3. An attempt to change

Under the influence of professional milieus of architects and urban planners, the new government in 2017 appointed the National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning, followed by a partial incorporation of architecture into the legislative domain of culture in 2018. Also the signing of the Davos Declaration by the Minister of Culture, Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Gliński, demonstrates the determination to reverse the progressive degradation of space in Poland. “Public space is a value” – under this slogan, the National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning operates in three spheres: changes in harmful legislation, educating the public, and vocational improvement of professionals. The Institute pursues – most broadly understood – the humanistic approach to architecture and urban planning, their humanistic qualities and values. For the first time since 1949, the milieu of architects and urban planners – through the NIAiU – started changing the absurdly bureaucratic regulations, so that the space would again serve the inhabitants of towns and villages. The Institute also offers the government its opinions and takes stance regarding the public procurement law, while lobbying for architectural competitions procedure to be used in designing spaces and public buildings. In the sphere of education, the Institute has become a platform for cooperation between non-governmental institutions (NGOs), which in recent decades have been actively working in the field of architectural education, and the ministries responsible for education in the Polish State. The goal is to work out a methodology and a substantive basis for teaching children and young people the value of “their own” space – the room, the flat, the backyard, the city, the landscape. The experience of Scandinavian countries and Ireland is very helpful in this respect, and Poland benefits from it.

In the area of raising the profile of the architect profession – coupled with emphasizing the architect’s responsibility and professional improvement – NIAiU takes part in developing the legislation defining the architect’s profession. The Institute proposes and participates in legislative initiatives that change bad city planning law and construction regulations (the

Building Code). In this respect, recovering the 70 lost years will last for decades – nonetheless, the work on the creation of more human, people-friendly spaces continues.

Is there a chance to create conditions in Poland for producing friendly, “human” spaces, taking into account all the contemporary challenges of space transformation? Is it possible to introduce a “culture of building”? I am a careful pessimist. (Do you know who a pessimist is? He is a well-informed optimist).

Particularly difficult problems include the need to take seriously the risks of climate change, the deficit of clean energy, minimising the use of CO₂ and water in construction, facing the shortages of drinking water, waste management, as well as inequitable access to housing and to friendly public spaces. As Peter Buchanan said, architects are at a forefront of shaping the future changes that Mother Nature desires. This can be done by changing the surrounding spaces on a local scale, but within the framework of the global perspective and principles. It would require them to become aware – and to make society aware, including the politicians – of the fact that it is necessary to change the paradigm for transforming space.