

Paesaggi reali e mentali di Varsavia nel secondo conflitto mondiale
Physical and Mental Landscapes of Warsaw in World War II

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WAR-SAW = "bellum vidit":

La sessione si propone come analisi delle drammatiche trasformazioni del tessuto urbano della città di Varsavia, a partire dall'entrata delle truppe di Hitler nel settembre 1939, attraverso le tragedie dantesche delle due rivolte contro i nazisti (quella ebraica dell'aprile 1943 e quella polacca dell'agosto 1944), fino all'ambigua "liberazione", ossia l'avvento dell'Armata Rossa e la (ri)costruzione della nuova capitale polacca. Tramite interventi basati su documenti e memorie, nonché materiale filmico e iconografico di ogni genere, si cercherà di dare voce non solo ai ben noti eroi della resistenza, ma anche ai e alle testimoni tra la popolazione civile che quotidianamente "vide la guerra" (war-saw) tra occupazione, sterminio, collaborazione e sopravvivenza nella città che "sopravvisse alla propria morte".

WAR-SAW = "bellum vidit":

The session aims at an analysis of the violent transformations of the city of Warsaw urban fabric, from the entry of Hitler's troops in September 1939, through the unspeakable tragedies of the two risings against the Nazis (the Jewish one in April 1943 and the Polish one in August 1944) until the ambiguous "liberation", or the arrival of the Red Army and the (re)construction of Poland's new capital city. With papers based on documents and memories, as well as a variety of iconography and film footage, session participants will try to report the voices not only of the well-known heroes of the Resistance movement but also of the male and female witnesses among the civilian population that "War-saw" (saw war) on a daily basis amidst occupation, extermination, collaboration and survival in a city that "survived its own death".

PREPRINT

A window onto Waliców: Liberating new perspectives

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the legacy of memory of the Second World War as one of many layers of memory in the palimpsestic urban landscape of Warsaw. Focused on a single site in the centre of the Polish capital, a street containing three ruined townhouses and fragments of the old Ghetto wall which have remained intact since the end of the war and are now in a state of dereliction, the paper will analyse the roles that architecture has played, and can play, in the processes of memory.

Keywords

Urban reconstruction, memory, palimpsest.

Introduction

«I have a window to the other side, / impudent Jewish window / to the beautiful Krasiński park, / where autumn leaves are drenched... / And I am not allowed to stand in the window (a very right ruling indeed), / Jewish worms... moles... should and are to be blind» [Szlengel 2012]. Waliców Street is found in the district of Wola, not far away from Warsaw's city centre, a place which in recent years has undergone rapid transformation, its perception changing from derelict and neglected into a business and commercial hub. While this revitalisation process brought many positive changes to the area, it also gave rise to gentrification [Leociak- Morpurgo 2019] – in fact, Wola of today has little in common with the same place twenty years ago. With the drastic change in the architectural fabric also came a change in the social fabric. Many people who lived here were forced to move out because of the inability to afford the new soaring rents or because their homes had been bought by developers; many of the old buildings had been demolished and replaced with high-rise office blocks and hotels. What characterizes most of these recent developments is a general lack of respect for the cultural heritage of the district, the value of which has not been recognized by the municipal authorities until recently – a neglect that has led to its slow eradication from the map of Warsaw. Yet the street of Waliców breaks from this saddening pattern of urban growth – it contains three ruined townhouses (no. 10, 12, 14) that stand opposite one of the last surviving fragments of the Ghetto wall, surviving ruins in a sea of development (figg.1, 3). These townhouses constitute the subject of my analysis as unique urban artefacts that have survived in their unaltered state since 1945. Surrounded by overwhelming blocks of the communist housing estate 'Behind the Iron Gate' on one side and the towering glass skyscrapers on the other, the site can be read as one of the 'memory islands' scattered around the city – it maintains the memory of war whereas that memory has been gradually eradicated around it; it has remained stable while everything around has changed. Despite their state of increasing dereliction and estrangement from their modern surroundings, which now impose on the ruins' fragile fabric, the three buildings nevertheless exude a strange power that is "at once repelling and attracting every passer-by" [Schnepf-Kołaczk 2019].



1: Waliców 14, 2018 (Image by the author).

1. Waliców: an orphaned island of memory

Between 1940 and 1942, Waliców Street formed part of the boundary of the newly demarcated Ghetto – what used to be a diverse, multicultural district suddenly became a site of terror as Warsaw's Jewish population was forcibly displaced here and cut away from the rest of the city. At the time, the discussed site was an enclave of artists, poets and singers who inhabited the three buildings. A famous resident was Władysław Szlengel, a poet and self-proclaimed chronicler of the life in the Ghetto, who wrote a poignant poem titled "The Window to the Other Side" describing his longing for what lies behind the Ghetto's wall and the tragedy of the city's division. The building which hosted the poet's home is one of the few surviving material traces of that fragment of Warsaw's history. «Today, the Ghetto doesn't exist anymore», says the Holocaust historian Jacek Leociak. «We can notice the remnants of its walls or fragments of the paving stones, but in its essence this part of the city, of its history, is concealed: with earth, asphalt, foundations of new buildings and oblivion. The only place where we can still find the Ghetto's inhabitants with their houses and streets, with their life and suffering, with their death, is a place in our memory» [Leociak-Engelking 2001]. Looking at the three buildings today it is hard to believe that they were once part of a dense residential fabric. All the buildings from the same era which used to surround the site are now gone, either destroyed in the war or erased at a later time, as part of the city's ongoing reconstruction – hence my use of the term 'orphaned' (fig. 2). Until 2018, they too faced a threat of demolition, as the city's conservation office repeatedly refused to recognize the ruined buildings' unique value. As David Crowley observes, «Poland's decisive rejection of communist rule in 1989 was marked by the construction of a new downtown of towering glass spires. In this progressive narrative, war-time ruins have been literally and figuratively overwritten by the activities of bulldozers and cranes» [Crowley 2011, 354]. After three decades, while the original fragments of the ruined Royal Castle (which stands in the Old Town having been reconstructed in the 1970s) are exhibited in the Warsaw Uprising museum and

treated as precious artefacts, the actual ruins that still stand in the city – which have a far greater emotional value for many people – do not seem to attract the attention of the city authorities, and if they do, they quickly become mere arguments in the political debate: «The left and right enter into conflict over the fate of the few lingering ruins in the city, symbolic conflicts over ownership of the past» [Crowley 2011, 371]. Waliców Street illustrates the complexities of this problem: long forgotten by the city authorities, yet fought for by numerous activists and architects, the three townhouses were finally listed as monuments in April 2018. It is therefore a unique opportunity to speculate about their yet unresolved future – and a chance to stir up the static memorialization debate in Poland. The city's planning authorities could treat this project as an opportunity to challenge the standard practice of imposing a predefined memory narrative and embrace the fact that the initiative to protect the townhouses had come from the public, acknowledging the different voices involved. Let us trace the layered history of this place, from the communist period to its pre-war origins, in order to reveal its palimpsestic nature.



2: The site and its urban context, 2019 (Image by the author).

2. «The future has an ancient heart» [Levi 1956]

Andreas Huyssen writes of Berlin as a city text which is «frantically being written and rewritten» – and yet one which «remains first and foremost a historical text, marked as much (...) by absences as by the visible presence of its past» [Huyssen 2003, 52]. Warsaw could be described in a similar manner, and nowhere is it more clearly visible than in a street like Waliców, where different periods of history have left their distinct imprints on the urban fabric, both in positive and negative forms, drastically reshaping this fragment of the city over the course of last decade.



3: Waliców Street, 2019 (Image by the author).

3. City under communist rule

Soon after the Second World war, the process of reconstruction of the entire city begun. This involved the enormous mobilization of architects, planners, politicians and the public and lead to the establishment of the Office for Reconstruction of the Capital in 1945. Its members embarked on a process of designing the new city, which was to be rebuilt with great efforts of its inhabitants. Naturally, in the planning the question of authenticity emerged: to what extent should the capital be a replica of the old one, and to what extent should its destruction be treated as an opportunity to create a 'better' and more modern version of Warsaw? What should and what shouldn't be reconstructed? Poland, under Soviet dominance since the end of the war, was undergoing a political transformation and soon, in 1948, power was monopolized by the newly created communist Polish United Workers' Party [*Siedemdziesiąt lat 2018*] – consequently, politics were to impact the new face of the city in most profound ways. As Crowley notes, "The question of what a war ruin might represent was deeply problematic for the communist authorities, not least because fragments of buildings and streets could be used to remember prohibited and unsanctioned aspects of Warsaw's history" [Crowley 2011, 371]. The communist approach to the city's post-war reconstruction is best exemplified by the construction of the Palace of Culture and Science in the 1950s, a Soviet-style skyscraper located at the very heart of Warsaw (near Waliców street) that dominates its landscape to this day. Twenty-four hectares of dense residential fabric were eradicated to make room for both the building and the surrounding Plac Defilad, which became the largest public square in Europe [Majewski 2009]. This unwelcome imposition on the city's fabric had both a physical and metaphorical dimension as a radical tool of political propaganda.

In contrast, the district of Wola remained derelict for many years after the war, being commonly known as the 'Wild West' by the city's inhabitants, who alluded to its ruined state and dangerous nature. Throughout the 1950s it was a dark world of mobsters and prostitutes, a place with really bad reputation where most people were afraid to go. This began to change at the beginning of the next decade as more and more buildings were reconstructed or renovated, and soon, between 1965 and 1972 a large housing estate that comprised of nineteen uniform apartment blocks, known as 'Behind the Iron Gate', was built right next to Waliców Street, radically changing the district's fabric but also reconnecting it with the city. While not much is known about the history of the three buildings on Waliców during the later communist years (1960s-1980s), it is worth looking at the fate of other war ruins in Warsaw at that time and the role they played in the public life of the city. An interesting example is a church on Żytnia street (also located in Wola) which, being one of the last war ruins in the city, was restored to its former architectural state in 2003. Curiously, its restoration caused an unexpected outcry: «Architects and conservators – figures who might otherwise have had an interest in restoration (or even demolition) – argued for the preservation of the church in its derelict state. The building, they argued, should be put under a bell jar (...), echoing calls for what Charles Merewether has dubbed a negative monument, which “makes a place for the ruins that remain; it allows them to become an anguished site of cultural patrimony”» [Crowley 2011, 366]. It was not because of its architectural merits but because of its tangled history that the church provoked such interest. Having been badly damaged in the Warsaw Uprising, the building stood as a ruin for many decades like the buildings on Waliców Street, while the communist authorities refused to reconstruct it.

Yet in the 1970s, the local community engaged in a process of spontaneous regeneration of the ruin, and soon the first mass was held under a temporary roof. The Catholic Church in Poland was at the time seen as one of the main opposition forces against the communist regime, and the ruined shrine on Żytnia street became one of the symbols of this opposition, acquiring a cultural and political function in addition to its religious one. It was there that in 1984 the avant-garde Theatre of the Eighth Day performed an adaptation of Zbigniew Herbert's poem Report from the Besieged City with scenes [Herbert 1989] of «victorious armies entering in the city and public executions of those who fought defending its streets» [Crowley 2011, 367]. The ruined frame of the church «added to the conspiratorial atmosphere of these events, suggestively linking them to the long cycle of insurrection and punishment which runs through Polish history» [Crowley 2011, 367]. Such instances of spontaneous inhabitation of ruins reveal their potential to become performative spaces which, in turn, allows them to perform a more dynamic role in the act of memory work. That a ruin can become a constantly changing stage rather than a static monument is a powerful concept.

On Waliców Street, the legacy of the communist past is visible in the form of the housing estate which forms an imposing background to the decaying townhouses and, perhaps most importantly, in the negative form of voids which remain after the destroyed buildings. In Warsaw, it could be argued, such absences are the most poignant testimony to the tragedy that befell the city.

4. War and obliteration

Waliców was intimately linked with the history of the Warsaw Ghetto, and the poignant memories of that time have persisted and continue to impact Warsaw's urban landscape to this day. The Ghetto was created in October 1940 (fig. 4) and the three townhouses on Waliców

were included within its boundaries from the beginning – yet the buildings on the other side of the street were not. Demarcating the borders of the Ghetto, the Nazi German authorities often incorporated existing buildings to form fragments of the boundary, as was the case with the Jung Brewery on Waliców Street opposite the townhouses – the brick wall which we can see today used to form one of its external walls (fig. 3). Since then, the population of the Ghetto continued to rise as more and more Jews were forcibly resettled and imprisoned within its borders, eventually reaching 400,000 people (with an average density of 9 people per room). The atmosphere in the Ghetto was one of constant anxiety and growing terror. In Ringelblum Archive in Warsaw there is a note saying: «On Waliców, a group of orthodox Jews is standing by the wall. Germans are setting their beards on fire» [Leociak 2019].

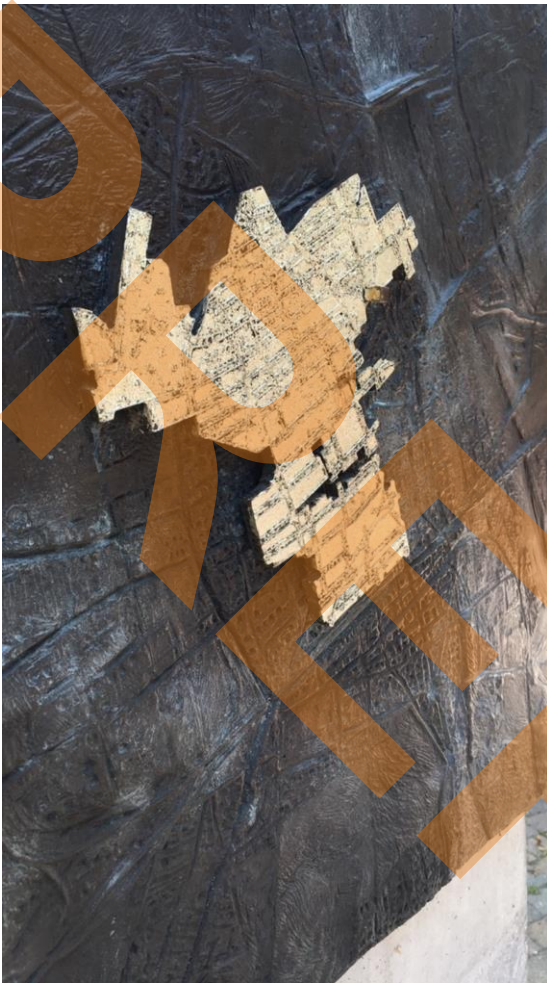
In 1942, after 254,000 of its residents were sent to the Treblinka extermination camp, the Ghetto's area was reduced and the so-called "Little Ghetto", of which Waliców was a part, rejoined the city. Because of this, the Ghetto's complete annihilation by the German forces a year later kept the street largely unaffected. In 1944, however, the townhouse no. 14 became one of the main bastions of Polish resistance during the Warsaw Uprising – and one of the last ones to give soldiers shelter. On September 24, a German missile caused an explosion that destroyed the building's front half – its absence, to recall Paul Celan's poem, is «palpably present» [After Huyssen 2003, 110] to this day (fig. 1). A week later, on October 2, the Uprising was ultimately defeated and the Nazi military began the planned annihilation of the rest of the city (fig. 5). Guido Morpurgo, an Italian architect and professor at Politecnico di Milano who conducted a workshop with his students devoted to the future of the buildings on Waliców, explains the systematic destruction of the city as the following:

«The destruction of Warsaw was not an effect of war, simply. It was a project – which is the main difference when you compare its destruction with that of other European cities. The aim of the Nazis was not only the extermination of Jews, but a disintegration of Polish identity. We can compare Warsaw with ancient cities whose destruction was total, apocalyptic, like Troi or Cartagena. From this point of view, Warsaw is a post-apocalyptic city and the townhouses are an enormous archeological find, demanding respect and understanding» [Bobrowicz 2018].

One can notice an interesting analogy between Morpurgo's readings of the city and those expressed by Aldo Rossi, who writes in his seminal book *The Architecture of the City*:

«One need only look at the layers of the city that archeologists show us; they appear as a primordial and eternal fabric of life, an immutable pattern. Anyone who remembers European cities after the bombings of the last war retains an image of disemboweled houses where, amid the rubble, fragments of familiar places remained standing, with their colors of faded wallpaper, laundry hanging suspended in the air, barking dogs – the untidy intimacy of places. And always we could see the house of our childhood, strangely aged, present in the flux of the city» [Rossi 1984, 22].

This archaeological comparison contributes to an understanding of the link between architecture and memory. Importantly, archaeologists do not see the value solely in monuments, but in the pieces of everyday architecture which also constitute the city. The buildings on Waliców Street might not have great architectural value, yet they have enormous emotional value which can legitimize their heritage status. Their 'anonymity', paradoxically, helps keep the memory alive – unlike in many of the other *lieux de mémoire*, memory here is not bounded by any singular historical narrative; rather than being controlled by the politicians, it is free to adapt to other perspectives.



4: Warsaw Ghetto boundary markers (Image by the author).

Conclusions

It could be argued that a city's urban layout is one of its fundamental cultural values, accumulated over centuries of growth, and in the case of Warsaw, the destruction of the city – and its subsequent reconstruction – has meant that a large proportion of that layout was irretrievably lost. Therefore, places like Waliców Street which contains some of the last material traces of the lost Warsaw are unique urban treasures. According to Guido Morpurgo, the three buildings represent the “DNA” of the city [Bobrowicz 2018] – Warsaw was built in this way, composed of large blocks of buildings, serving primarily as housing, yet essentially combining many different functions, hosting little artisan workshops, meeting spaces. In other words: it was a stage for the everyday urban life. This is the exact opposite of buildings being constructed around the site today, which always have single functions, as either offices, luxury apartments or commercial centres.

This process of decoding the urban DNA (similar to the notion of palimpsest) can help architects understand and appreciate the city's ancient fabric, which is a necessary step in conceiving the future of its lieux de mémoire. An alternative approach to reconstruction and heritage preservation is needed, standing in opposition to what has been done in Poland so far – an approach involving a multi-layered reading of the city's history. It could be argued that like the city of Ludomira from Italo Calvino's *Invisible cities*, Warsaw can only find its

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future by looking into its past: «And to feel sure of itself, the living Laudomia has to seek in the Laudomia of the dead the explanation of itself, even at the risk of finding more there, or less: explanations for more than one Laudomia, for different cities that could have been and were not, or reasons that are incomplete, contradictory, disappointing» [Calvino 1997, 127].



5: Świerczyński, M., *Warsaw, the capital of Poland, destroyed by German Nazis, January 1945* (Jankowski-Ciborowski 1971, 66).

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