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ŁÓDZ MACHINES FOR LIVING
– STANDARDISATION OF MULTIFAMILY
SOCIAL HOUSING OF THE POSTWAR
PROMISED LAND

ŁÓDZKIE MASZYNY DO MIESZKANIA
– STANDARYZACJA WIELORODZINNEGO
BUDOWNICTWA SOCJALNEGO POWOJENNEJ
ZIEMI OBIECANEJ

A b s t r a c t

In postwar Lodz, whose landscape was not supposed to be a source of personal aesthetic delight, the ideas of functionalism and social egalitarianism were realised by groups of multi-family buildings, whose presence in the city space betokens the submission of aesthetics to the rules of radical standardisation and rejection of a model of architecture being an outcome of individual needs of its users and designers. Finding a consensus between strict utility standards and a search for a high quality of housing environment appeared to be extremely difficult in the post war conditions, which is evidenced by the record of the struggle of urban planners and architects against the radical focus being put on the city functionalisation.

Keywords: postwar social housing developments, Lodz housing estates, housing standardisation

Streszczenie

W Łodzi powojennej, której krajobraz nie miał być źródłem prywatnego zachwytu, spełnieniem idei funkcjonalizmu i egalitaryzmu społecznego stały się zespoły obiektów mieszkaniowych wielorodzinnych, których obecność w przestrzeni miasta świadczy o podporządkowaniu estetyki zasadom radykalnej standaryzacji oraz odrzuceniu modelu architektury stanowiącej wynik indywidualnych potrzeb jej użytkowników oraz twórców. Odnalezienie konsensusu pomiędzy wyśrubowanymi standardami użyteczności i poszukiwaniem wysokiej jakości środowiska mieszkaniowego okazało się w warunkach powojennych szczególnie trudne, a świadectwem tego jest historia zmagania łódzkich urbanistów i architektów z radykalną funkcjonalizacją miasta.

Słowa kluczowe: powojenne budownictwo socjalne, łódzkie osiedla mieszkaniowe, standaryzacja zabudowy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Arrays of multifamily social developments completed in the years 1948–1989 constitute a basic element of the architectural landscape of contemporary Lodz, being a fragment of an unfulfilled concept of a modern city dating back to the times of the Second Polish Republic. As soon as World War II ended, the supposed *promised land* was almost overnight transformed into a modern metropolis. At the same time, both before and after the war, Lodz was recorded to have one of the highest population density rates in the country. It was caused not only by the historically shaped structure of the settlement, but also by territorial shifts and population displacements after the war. Thus, multidirectional changes in the land use had to include the extensive development of housing for the growing number of Lodz inhabitants, and it is the year 1948, which can be treated as a significant borderline in the history of the evolution of Lodz housing architecture.

Crossing this threshold did not imply only the quantity change. The war and its geopolitical consequences caused that Lodz, like many other Polish cities, became an arena of competition between the style of Stalinist propaganda and the returning ideas of modernism. However, it soon succumbed to the wave of standardisation, expressed in a form of rough blocks, deprived of detail, meeting the practical and technical requirements and the parameters, which determined the minimum quality of living conditions. In postwar Lodz, whose landscape was not supposed to be a source of personal aesthetic delight, the ideas of functionalism and social egalitarianism were realised by groups of multifamily buildings, whose presence in the city space betokens the submission of aesthetics to the rules of radical standardisation and rejection of the model of architecture being an outcome of individual needs of its users and designers. Finding a consensus between strict utility standards and a search for a high quality of residential environment appeared to be extremely difficult in the post war conditions, which is evidenced by the record of the struggle of urban planners and architects against the radical focus being put on the city functionalisation.

In present times, the issue concerning the quality of housing in Lodz deserves particular attention due to the fact that the local size of the problem of the city depopulation and formation of poverty ghettos cannot be compared to any other big city in contemporary Poland. One of the reasons for the negative social and spatial phenomena is considered to be a difficult housing situation of the inhabitants of Lodz¹. The aim of the paper is to explain the political as well as economic circumstances, accompanying the process of building Lodz housing estates in the time of the Polish People's Republic and to analyse the designers' attitudes toward transformations realised in an undemocratic way, using undemocratic methods. The Author attempts to find an answer to the question: did the supplementation of the city tissue with numerous housing estates, performed during the second half of the 20th century, allowed approaching the realisation of a dream of transforming Lodz into a city able to provide optimal living conditions for its population?

¹ W. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, K. Kruszyński, *Dziedziczenie biedy i wykluczenia społecznego – w perspektywie lokalnej polityki społecznej*, [in:] *Polski Raport Social watch 2010*, R. Szarfenberg (eds.), Wyd. Kampania Przeciw Homofobii, Warszawa 2011, p. 49–55.

2. HOUSE FACTORIES

The establishment of a new authority in March 1945 gave a beginning to the period of rapid ideological and functional changes, which had a strong impact on the development of the city in the coming decades. Within a few following years, Lodz managed to reach the status of a metropolis. The *promised land* provided housing opportunities, which attracted large numbers of people displaced from the Eastern Borderland as well as inhabitants of Warsaw and other areas of the country destroyed by the war. Communist propaganda took advantage of the negative atmosphere caused by a growing hunger for accommodation, and contemporaneous publicists emphasised that the enormous degree of destruction was a legacy of the pre-war times. *Multi-storey tenant houses, sometimes with luxury apartments, in the vicinity of poor wooden houses, among them factory buildings with cramped yards and high chimneys sticking out between densely built outhouses, this is the image of the chaotic architecture in the Lodz city center*² – was written.

On the other hand, the development of housing in the 1940s did not keep pace with the bold vision of Lodz as a metropolis connected with the dynamic progress in science, culture and art. The attempts made were often limited to modernisation processes or involved a continuation of developments started in the inter-war period. The ongoing reconstruction of Warsaw caused an outflow of people and institutions from Lodz, resulting in the inhibition of the development of its metropolitan functions. Despite those limitations, the existing direction of development was maintained by introducing changes in the spatial landscape of the city. In December 1940, the German occupant authorities' resolution about the engulfment of chaotically spreading suburbs by the city came into force. Within its new boundaries, Lodz covered an area almost 4 times larger than before – over 21 000 ha. This radical decision was prompted by the need to create an enormous number of facilities for *the extremely badly and tightly built city complex*³. The area of the strict city centre with low houses of up to 5 floors and industrial buildings was inhabited by nearly half of the total city population. The transformation of the *capitalist* Lodz into *the centre of socialism* required significant changes in the housing system. The 6-year Plan involved building *socrealist* housing estates in the poorest working-class areas and increasing the number of inhabitants by over 40 000. The transformation of the Baluty district became a priority investment. The image of modern working-class housing estates was supplemented with a system of nurseries, kindergartens, schools, shops and health clinics. This vision, which was advertised both in newspapers and propaganda brochures, was realised only partially. Due to the limited financial resources and the designers lacking the ambition to create iconic *socrealist* architecture, the style of housing design was dominated by utility trend and the buildings were usually deprived of detail.

As early as in the years 1953–1954, Polish authorities gave up the unreal ideas of a socialist *promised land*. The ongoing crisis brought about reductions in the size of flats and apartments as well as an increase in the density and height of developments [ill. 1]. The city entered a new post-socialist era with many unsolved problems. The existing experience and long-lasting works resulted in the creation of *A general plan for spatial development of the city of Lodz*, which was approved in 1961. The planned spatial system was described as

² *Łódź w walce i pracy*, Łódzki Komitet Frontu Narodowego, Łódź 1954.

³ B. Graczyk, T. Szymczak, *Rady Narodowe*, [in:] *Łódź w latach 1945–1960*, E. Rosset (eds.), Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Łodzi, Łódź 1962, p. 61.



relaxed concentric. It was being considered to relieve the city centre through extending the housing function of four main districts: Baluty, Gorna, Polesie and Widzew. On the other hand, Retkinia and Brus were included in the scheme of the largest multifamily housing developments. The design prepared by the city urban office played a key role in the planning of the location for future housing estates and also had a significant influence on the shape of the detailed plans developed in the following years.

In the discussed period, numerous attempts were made to reform the existing model of the Polish economy and, following the mild wave of political thaw, Lodz entered a period of apparent stability. The essential part of the new policy involved changes in the structure of investments and allocation of bigger funds for the modernisation of the city. At that time, a few new housing developments were realised within the traditional boundaries of peripheral railway; however, further from the city centre than the existing estates. In order to facilitate the installation of the technical infrastructure, houses were built in the vicinity of the most urbanised areas. One of the biggest achievements appeared to be the transformation of the Lodz transport system, which took place in a few stages. The redevelopment of the road system and public transport was accompanied by a dynamic development of the city. In 1972, the designers from the city urban office created *A General Local Plan for the Spatial Development of the City of Lodz – Perspective*. Due to the fact that the city was running out of fitted lots of land, it was necessary to engulf new areas in the East, South and West, which implicated crossing the boundaries of the peripheral railway. The dynamic urban and architectural development of Lodz involved building numerous groups of skyscrapers in many parts of the city, among others, in the existing housing estates in Baluty or Doly. Teofilow was the first housing estate built outside the ring of the peripheral railway. Another large housing development Widzew-East was realised starting from the mid1970s on the southern side of Rokicinska Street. In the same period of time, the largest housing estate in Lodz called Retkinia was built. An innovative solution in the history of Lodz family developments was represented by the Downtown Housing Estate with 14–15-storey buildings in the very heart of the city [ill. 3].

In the 1970s, ninety thousand apartments were built in Lodz, but the demand for flats was so big that it took people more than 20 years of waiting before they could get their own place within the membership of a housing cooperative. Among old communal houses, almost one third did not have private toilets. Under these circumstances, it was necessary to build more new housing estates like Retkinia-West, a diversified, loosely arranged development completed in the mid1980s. During the same decade, the Widzew estate was extended and a new housing estate called Radogoszcz-West was built in the

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- III. 1. Prototype housing developments in the framing construction, Lodz, the 1950s and 1960s. Above: the housing estate Żubardź (construction site view). Below: the housing estate Dąbrowa (plans, elevation). Source: Osterman J., *Zagadnienie budownictwa prototypowego w Polsce*, [in:] Architektura, vol. 6, 1961
 - III. 2. The concept of developments in Piotrkowska Street / Zamenhofa Street in Lodz, 1976–1981. Arch. B. Kardaszewski, M. Wiśniewski. Source: Ciarkowski B., *Profesor Kardaszewski (1931–2001). Budowniczy nowoczesnej Łodzi*, [in:] TECHNE TEXNH. Pismo Łódzkich Historyków Sztuki, vol. 1, Łódź 2012
 - III. 3. A contemporary view of high-rise building developments in the Downtown Housing Estate in Lodz, the second half of the 1970s. Source: Kusiński J., *Miasto*, Wyd. J. Kusiński, 2008

northern part of the city. Despite the apparent progress being made, the developers had to face growing difficulties in providing supplies for the ongoing investments and the increasing hardships of everyday life triggered social unrest leading to mass protests. Soon, *Lodz underwent shock therapy and experienced a true decline. That was not just one of many historic crises. Our city faced the collapse of its powerful position after 150 years of holding the status of a strong industrial centre and the capital of the Polish textile industry*⁴.

3. CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF THE RIGHT ANGLE

Researchers agree that the year 1945 did not constitute a significant caesura in the history of Polish art, artists enjoyed their freedom and all transformations occurred mainly on the political level. At the same time, the dependence of Poland on the Soviet Union resulted in far-reaching changes aimed at the regime gaining control over architecture and other art disciplines. The process of *ideological shaping* involved a smart transfer of the discussion concerning the utilitarianism of art in the Second Polish Republic into the postwar reality. The architectural discourse was based on a catchy slogan about the necessity of reconstructing the destroyed country. During the first postwar period, it was often emphasised that art could not be a point of reference in the face of the ongoing civilisation crisis. Starting from the 1960s, Polish architects designed buildings for an anonymous user with average needs. *Moreover, limitations in the materials availability caused that a design which on paper seemed to represent high architecture was realized on a level dangerously approaching low architecture, which became an inspiration for western postmodernism.*⁵ Based on the designers' opinions coming from the 1970s and 1980s, it can be observed that Polish architecture was far behind the western trends. Jakub Wujek, an architect and co-author of the postmodernist spatial concept of the housing estate Radogoszcz-East, pointed out that *the year 1967 in Poland was the time of declaring a competition in designing a house factory, whereas abroad Robert Venturi published his book «Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture»*⁶.

Another local example of an attempt to break up with the existing schemes in the context of late real socialism is building in the strict city centre, in the years 1976–1981, a housing estate designed by Bolesław Kardaszewski and Mirosław Wiśniewski [ill. 2]. The authors managed to join the forms of traditional architecture with the building site industrialisation. Based on the traditional patterns of shaping the spatial arrangements, the architects proposed, among others: a frontage arrangement with an outbuilding and integrating the functions of housing with services and trade. Much attention was paid to the advantages of the W-70 system, created, among others, for the needs of housing developments. The catalogues contained a number of elements covered by central typing, but regional and local typing or even a possibility of providing elements for a single housing

⁴ A. Grzegorzcyk, *Słowo wstępne*, [in:] *Ilustrowana Encyklopedia Historii Łodzi*, vol. 12, Łódź 2010, p. 1.

⁵ L. Klein, *Postmodernizm polski: od wielkiej płyty do architektury wczesnej transformacji*, [in:] *PI. Postmodernizm polski. Architektura i urbanistyka*, L. Klein (eds.), Stowarzyszenie 40 000 Malarzy, Warszawa 2013, p. 8.

⁶ J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie architektury*, Arkady, Warszawa 1986, p. 238.

estate were also taken into consideration. The designers' efforts to create a composition based on the historic background were to some extent inhibited by the investors' decisions leading to the simplifications in the form of buildings, including the resignation from mansard roofs or attractive reinforced concrete balustrades. Despite the difficulties connected with the realisation of designs, the history of tenant houses in Piotrkowska Street proves that the architectural concepts at that time had a big potential. The housing estates in the centre of Lodz reflected modern trends in searching for the ways of reconciling the ideas of socmodernism with new means of expression, thus becoming a subject of many discussions. The concepts introduced by Mirosław Wiśniewski, concerning the necessity to introduce into the city centre new building technologies adapted according to the local needs, were commonly accepted⁷ The presented examples prove that Lodz architects tried to graft the elements of new trends on the inflexible ground of the existing solutions, referring to the traditions of the city and thus *cross the threshold of the right angle and the plane, mainly in prefabrication*⁸.

4. SUMMARY

Socialist housing programs for the city of Lodz were based on the necessity to adjust the number of new apartments being built to the demographic situation, which was changing rapidly after the war. The aim of the employed strategy was to create an easily available housing environment, and not to satisfy the needs and aspirations of individual citizens or local communities. The issue was solved by creating standards deciding about the final quality of housing architecture. This situation set serious limitations on postwar architects concerning the possibility of developing individual and authorial concepts of housing architecture, which would meet the local needs. Along with the changing political and economic situation of the country, the housing systems and typology were subordinated to the ruling idea of social egalitarianism. Blocks of buildings contrasted sharply with the surroundings and the style of houses had no clear reference to the context. Also, the Lodz housing estates, developed in the period of the Polish Socialist Republic, are characterised by the typing of buildings and unification of the structure that did not usually go outside the existing housing scheme, which was supposed to satisfy the basic sanitary-biological needs of the inhabitants. This problem was recognised by architects, who were looking for urban and architectural standards meeting the current social challenges. As early as in the 1970s, a significant discrepancy between the ambitions of the postwar Lodz architects and the possibilities of putting them into life were observed. Many designers noticed the fact that housing developments realised by the social authorities did not comply with the theory and tradition of creating an optimal housing environment. While discussing the architecture of the period 1970–1989, special attention should be paid to the phenomena signalling the changes in the Polish theoretical thoughts, which are often perceived as a temporary occurrence reflecting the changes in the political system in 1989. Lodz, like all the other parts of the country in the second part of the 1970s,

⁷ M. Wiśniewski, *Przebudowa stref starej zabudowy w centrach miejskich*, [in:] Komunikat SARP, vol. 3, 1980, p. 23–27.

⁸ B. Kardaszewski, *Architektura 1955–1985*, catalogue, Muzeum Historii Miasta Łodzi, Łódź 1985, p. 381–382.

followed the trends to cross the borders of standardisation, particularly as a result of the devaluation of the state ideology.

In 2005, the architect Johannes Tovatt expressed a deeply humanistic opinion, shared by many contemporary researchers, that proper functioning of city inhabitants is possible on condition that their basic civil rights are respected and the needs of a particular urban surrounding are taken into consideration.⁹ According to the author, the success of urban planning derives from the respect for the surrounding social context as well as the tradition of the place. Based on the postwar experience, it can be assumed that creating optimal living conditions for the city population requires the establishment of clear boundaries between the public, semi-public and private spaces, and providing residential developments with features adequate for the social and spatial context. The contemporary possibilities of realising the traditional functions of the city, such as exchange of human thought as well as development of science and culture, depend to a large extent on the quality of housing. As history shows, this value cannot be replaced by the ideas of egalitarianism, and the poor set of tools expressed by the spatial form of a Lodz socialist housing estate becomes a perfect comment on the role played by the low housing standards in generating negative social phenomena.

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⁹ J. Tovatt, *Belief in Tomorrow's City Personal Responsibility and Commitment in Urban Planning*, [in:] *A+U*, vol. 3, 2005.