

## THE PLANNING AND LAYING OUT OF GREEN SPACES IN RELATION TO THE URBAN TRANSFORMATION OF WARSAW AFTER 1918

### *Introducing Warsaw to an overwhelmingly non-Polish audience*

It is the chief city of the newly extended European Union's fourth largest and sixth most populous member state, but Warsaw remains a comparatively little-known and poorly comprehended place. The predominant sense of unfamiliarity is most typically explained in geopolitical terms. Were it not for the vagaries of the country of which Warsaw is capital, perception both of the city itself and its place in relation to modern European history would undoubtedly be stronger than it is. On the one hand, relative indifference reflects a deeply-ingrained tendency among Western, and in particular the Anglo-American establishments (including scholars in positions of authority), to overlook the so-called Polish Question. On the other hand, in their determination to compensate for what is seen as Western disinterest or even ignorance, analogous Polish circles have been prone to portray Warsaw in a highly subjective way. For ideological as well as purely patriotic reasons, the city's modern history is usually subordinated to that of the Polish 'nation', or 'people', and thus the state.

Regardless of its key representational functions as the principal centre for the political, economic, cultural and educational life of successive incarnations of 'Poland', Warsaw's spatial growth in the 20th century and the policies applied both to shape and control it are highly complicated, not to mention ambiguous, issues. This is a problem that needs to be placed not only in the context of national politics but equally that of the urban question and future of so-called town planning on a global scale.

### *Assumptions & Objectives*

An evident prerequisite for the future survival of any urban agglomeration accommodating hundreds upon thousands of people is its capacity to exist in some kind of comparative symbiosis with nature. The designating and laying out or expanding of pre-existing green areas became a fundamental aspect of so-called town planning aimed at enlarging, redeveloping or even transforming urban spatial form as shaped by the typically chaotic forces of the industrial age. In the process of carrying out their aims,

which in theory at least were ethical and praiseworthy, the planners came to be accused of turning the urban organism into an urban machine. In the metamorphosis that Warsaw was put through in the mid-to-late-20th century, the system of green and open spaces created reflects one of the more effective aspects of the town planners' ambitions to rebuild and redevelop a functional, aesthetically pleasing and above all healthy urban environment. In spite of considerable improvements observed in living standards and housing conditions during the course of the 20th century, no generally positive summary appraisal can be made of the overall spatial structure – and in particular the architectural profile – subjected as it was to violent alterations upon which the city's residents had very little, if indeed any genuine, influence.

In spatial terms, three zones within the so-called metropolitan complex of Warsaw may be distinguished: central, inner-urban and the outer, semi-urbanised belt. Apart from reflecting physical and demographic decentralisation since the early 20th century of the inner built-up area as it had taken shape from the mid-1800s (ca. 200,000 to over a million inhabitants; cf. table), this division into concentric zones enveloping the inner nucleus also helps relate so-called 'green spaces' to contrasting intensities of urbanisation: (1) public gardens and tree-lined streets (city centre, Praga and other inner-urban districts); (2) parks laid out and cultivated on ex-military land or so-called 'natural' (i.e. wild) green corridors or 'wedges' (surrounding and penetrating into the main inner and suburban districts); and (3) green belt and forest reserved in relation to the pre-existing health resorts and the earliest garden cities (outer-urban periphery and so-called commuter belt in what functioned between 1975 and 1994 as the 'Capital City Voivodship').

Within the 1918\*-2004 period under investigation three main eras must be distinguished resulting from watersheds caused by the two world wars and collapse of the so-called Iron Curtain. Of these, most attention should be placed on the middle era between 1939 and 1989, during which an essentially new urban body came into being.

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\* The metaphorical significance of 11th November 1918 is perhaps worth explaining in passing to emphasise the way Warsaw's importance as an urban centre has tended to take second place to the role, symbolic as well as official, it has played since the Partitions as capital city to the state and equally *urbs prima* of the nation.

### *Precursory Era*

The 'birth' of modern, rational town planning in Warsaw should be predated to 1909, when the tsarist fortifications enveloping the city began to be demilitarized. The way for intensive development in the so-called suburban periphery, where building restrictions had severely curtailed urbanisation, was thus opened. In the city centre, densely built up with tenement houses, the only green areas immediately accessible to ordinary people were ex-palatial grounds such as the Saxon and Krasiński Gardens. Confiscated by the tsarist authorities, the famous Łazienki Gardens were made accessible to Warsaw's citizens only after 1915.

The years immediately preceding the outbreak of war were ones of considerable activity. Apart from frenzied private speculation in the so-called tenement-barracks city, or *Mietskaserne*stadt, public-minded initiatives were supported by the municipal authorities, who had taken on the responsibility of creating extensive water supply and sewerage as well as electrical and gas systems. The modern city may, in actual fact, be regarded as already being well in the making. An enormous contrast remained, nevertheless, between the wealthy central districts and suburban periphery, largely inhabited (as in Vienna and the *banlieux* of Paris) by the working class. The impetus to move out of the crowded tenement districts would have been strong among certain groups, and the first garden cities were already founded at Młociny and Żąbki. These were followed in the 1920s by a series of such planned settlements which currently serve more as satellite townships than independently functioning urban communities. Summer retreats and health resorts built of wooden or timber-frame houses for the middle classes now lying within the orbit of the greater metropolitan area had either been founded from scratch or greatly expanded from the turn of the century.

A more tangible 'starting point' to the modernist perception of urban planning is marked by the 'great incorporation' of 1916 and creation of the Greater Warsaw municipal area. A team led by architect Tadeusz Tołwiński drew up a preliminary plan, typically regarded as being the first of its kind to embrace the entire built-up area. Within the extended city limits, garden suburbs rather than fully-fledged garden cities were laid out as part of 'regulation plans' prepared for the whole city after 1918; e.g. at Czerniaków (from 1924) and Saska Kępa (1926). Apart from reflecting the importance

attached to green spaces for recreation and above all health, Żoliborz, the largest and most widely cited example of a planned district dating from the interwar years, gives some idea of the economics and social groups benefiting from such housing projects and estates. Founded on extensive military land surrounding the Russian Citadel, this district was successively developed with housing 'colonies' intended for Polish army officers (1921-22), civil servants (1923-26), journalists (1928-30) as well as the 'petty bourgeoisie' (1927-30). The Army Housing Allocation Fund, 'Social Insurance Establishment' (ZUS) and State Mutual Insurance Establishment for Intellectual Workers (*sic!*) also raised estates for their employees here (cf.: professors' and other such housing 'colonies' elsewhere in the city). However, the most acclaimed undertaking was the series of between three- and five-storey blocks raised from 1925 to 1939 by the Warsaw Housing Cooperative (WSM), founded in 1923, and designed by Stanisław Brukalski with his wife Barbara and/or Bruno Zborowski in collaboration with a group of town planners. The latter included Jan Chmielewski who, together with the architect Szymon Syrkus, conceived a model of the city planned as one, integrated urban body. Dubbed 'Functional Warsaw', this schematic plan for the metropolitan area became a canon of Polish town planning and was to be made use of after the Second World War.

***Wartime destruction and the era of central planning (First and second urban 'deaths'?)***

While the city's obliteration in four gruesome stages between September 1939 and January 1945 is a better-known aspect of Warsaw's modern history, it is not so readily acknowledged that such terrible material destruction provided the new political order and architect-planners alike with a 'golden opportunity' to push through visions of urban utopia. As much as it can be said to have been based on the pseudo doctrine of socialist-realism, based mainly on Soviet models, the glittering metropolis of 'glass, steel and snow-white concrete', interspersed by extensive open spaces accommodating sports stadiums and other leisure-cum-recreational facilities intended for the well-being (and education) of the working classes, recalls the optimistic visions of architects from the 1920s and 1930s. Many of these people became actively engaged in building a brave new world with selectively reconstructed districts and individual monuments supposedly

‘historic’ in (exterior) form but ‘socialist’ in (interior) content. While they may have come to function and be administered along different lines to the pre-1939 housing colonies and communes, residential estates with ample open space at the rear of or between housing blocks reflect a certain degree of continuity from the experimental inter-war years (e.g. the Brukalski [Muranów] and Syrkus [Kolo, Praga] couples). The cult of Stalin and socialist-realism alike were rejected in 1956, but the decade covered by the Three-Year and Six-Year Plans (for the Reconstruction of the Capital City) lay the foundations for the city’s spatial development throughout the entire era of People’s Poland (1944-1989).

The city’s transformation resulted almost as much from the mass compulsory purchase of private property after 1945 as the physical obliteration inflicted by the Nazis. The act of nationalisation (or ‘communalisation’) was justified by the need to coordinate reconstruction in accordance with a single, rational plan. In a city planned to house two million residents, about 17000 owners of real estate were disinherited, some 5400 of whom had possessed properties in the central districts. Was this such a terrible sacrifice to make? On the other hand, the head of the ‘Chief Council for Reconstruction’ was not the mayor of Warsaw but the first secretary of the United Polish Workers’ Party (whose initials happened to be BB: Bolesław Bierut, alleged author of the Sixth Year Plan album). A tremendous amount of ‘doublethink’ can be said to have accompanied Warsaw’s urban regeneration. On the one hand, politics and ideology lay at the very heart of what was actually carried out, while on the other those architects cooperating with the new political order succumbed to a long established relationship with the powers that be, harking back to royal or magnate-noble patronage (as well as favoured architects, the state had propagated certain artist groups in the 1920s and 1930s).

Professional engagement was undermined by a pseudo ideology that failed abysmally to produce adequate housing for the rapidly growing postwar population. The annual average figure for new flats created in 1936-1938 was not exceeded until the late 1950s. The main example selected was conceived in connection with the ‘inner-party’ slogan that the industrial proletariat would be moved into the heart of the former ‘bourgeois’ city. The complex of housing estates (Mariensztat, Mirów, Muranów South, Wola, as well as reconstructing the Old and New Towns) raised from 1948 on either side

of the 7-kilometre East-West Thoroughfare, opened on 'People's (Holi-)Day' (22nd July) 1949 to link the working-class districts of Praga and Wola on either side of the Vistula, lends some impression of the scale involved. The group of four supervising architects even referred to themselves as the Scala Quartet.

The demarcating of extensive green zones and 'wedges' to provide 'green lungs' was fundamental to the city's postwar redevelopment on an open plan. In the city centre, not only were former parks expanded alongside new ones, but entire districts were to become parkland. As areas for 'cultural' (*sic!*) as well as physical education and recreation, green spaces were intended to play an equally significant part in social, cultural, and thus political, conditioning as architectural design. The essential wisdom of planning green spaces in postwar Warsaw lies in the fact they were conceived as part of a long-term policy. While seeking to take full advantage of the enormous merits of the urban agglomeration's natural surroundings, the planners foresaw the cultivating of land designated as open in coordination with the city's spatial expansion. This subsequent phase in Warsaw's post-war redevelopment foresaw the cultivating of parkland that would serve the inhabitants of the new and increasingly expansive housing-estate-cum-districts going up in the inner and outer suburbs. Initially defined, somewhat dauntingly, as 'Multifunctional Centres for Leisure and Recreation' (WOWR), six such complexes, subsequently known as Main Parks, were established in the 1960s incorporating the Bielany Woods and Kępa Potocka to the North, Moczydło in Wola, Szczęśliwice and Pole Mokotowskie to the South and the so-called King Stanislas Augustus Embankment in Praga opposite the City Centre. An additional series of extensive green land was designated during the Gierek and Jaruzelski decades at Bemowo, the 'Ski Run' on the escarpment at Mokotów, Wyżyny, Bródno, the Goćław Valley and Tarchomin.

Much of the building after 1956, echoing formulas established by the Athens Charter, proved increasingly bland and subject to the mass-construction methods favoured by the post-Stalinist regimes. Attitudes to open spaces in relation to built-up ones do not seem to have altered to any considerable degree. Reintroducing, however, modernist-cum-functional to succeed socialist-cum-nationalist orientated planning undermined the formal layout and architecture of the city as it had been envisaged before 1956. The loss of shape and form reflected a growing lack of any sense of direction in

planning the urban environment as a growing ideological alongside terminal economic crisis was experienced from the 1970s. This crisis was supposed to be solved by the 'reintroduction' of a 'free-market' economy.

### ***Epilogue (Back to Square One?)***

Finally, to bring this paper up to date, while demonstrating, as elsewhere, an almost complete retreat from centralised urban planning, Warsaw in 2004 represents a bizarre concoction of global trends in urbanisation and what has been inherited from the city's above all more recent, post-1945 past. The official line is reflected in the correlation between the 'Second Republic' of the interwar years and post-1989 change of name from 'the People's' to the 'Third' Republic. The consequent changes inflicted on built form and spatial layout may be characterised by dramatic and aggressive vertical development in the so-called CBD, accompanied by piecemeal, but very extensive and typically haphazard horizontal expansion in the suburbs spreading ever further beyond the city limits into 'exurbia'. Apart from reflecting bids from newly enriched segments of Polish 'society' to live their own great American dream, these developments are highly reminiscent of the kind of speculation and land jobbery so reviled by architects-cum-urban planners and socially conscious publicists alike when referring to the Warsaw of intolerable inequalities, injustice and jarring aesthetic contrasts born out of poorly legislated industrialisation, especially under tsarist rule.

In a revealing summary report from in 2002, Ewa Kicińska, who delivered a paper to the IFLA here in Athens in 1990, paints a miserable summary picture for the New Millennium: *Alongside the elementary and local network of open spaces, the system of main parks is currently being built over. Building on these areas eliminates the work of a hundred years in the cause of improving living conditions and recreation of Warsaw's inhabitants.* For some listeners, this might sound like a voice in the wilderness. For others, considering the nature of the current age, thinking in terms of urban residents travelling by public transport to the nearest park for an afternoon's rest and recreation may seem highly anachronistic, especially now that so many people possess their own mono-transportation and may journey out of the city. A certain proportion of contemporary Warsaw's populace may also board a passenger jet plane in order to spend

a week or just a weekend in another part of the world altogether... In a recent poll, 23% of the population was said to rest and exercise by ‘taking a walk in the park’; nevertheless, 30% enjoyed its leisure and recreation in the comparative seclusion of its own allotments...

(2650 words)

	1914	1939	1945 (June)	1973	1996
City centre ( <i>Śródmieście</i> )	ca.754,755 (628,000*)	680,182	ca.22,000	200,800**	149,000
inner city (various names)	ca.1,100,000 (with inner suburbs)	1,300,000 (“ <i>Wielka Warszawa</i> ”)	ca.162,000	(659,400****)	945,800 (“ <i>gmina</i> ” <i>Centrum</i> )
Municipal area	884,000	1,300,000	377,900	1,387,800	1,638,300
(greater) urban complex		1,600,000***	ca.860,000	2,155,000*****	ca.2,500,000

Table: comparative statistics for central, inner and outer Warsaw since 1914

\* so-called tenement belt

\*\* cf. 1960: 210,000

\*\*\* in 1931

\*\*\*\* in 1956

\*\*\*\*\* in 1975

(Due to a lack of consistency in administrative divisions in relation to the broad functional divide, demographic statistics have had to be approximated)