

Warsaw: A Reconstruction that Began Before the War

Małgorzata Popiótek-Roßkamp, PhD
Centre for Historical Research of the
Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin

ABSTRACT

The demolition of the capital city of Poland during World War II was a unique act of the systematic annihilation of a city and its historical roots. The so-called Office for the Rebuilding of the Capital City managed to reconstruct not just the monuments, which were crucial for the city landscape, but entire streets and city structures, including the historical city center. The restored Warsaw Old Town subsequently became a national monument of Polish heroism, listed in 1980 by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

The rebuilt Warsaw Old Town is usually seen as an example of the most faithful, comprehensive, and complete reconstruction in the history of architecture. However, its restoration was not just a reproduction of the pre-war urban fabric, but a combination of a romantic vision of history, on the one hand, and 20th-century pragmatism, on the other. By demolishing particular buildings and rebuilding others, political and planning authorities sought to rewrite the history of the city. At the same time, they saw the complete destruction of the city as an opportunity to modernize its architecture and to finally upgrade the poor living conditions in the Warsaw apartments to meet 20th-century hygiene standards.

While looking for the source of inspiration for the reconstruction of Warsaw monuments, one can see a clear continuation of the pre-war urban planning and architecture, which is especially visible in the early years of Warsaw's reconstruction. The urban renewal program introduced in the Warsaw Old Town shows also some similarities with the projects carried out in the 1930s in Germany, Switzerland and Italy. Polish architects, as well as conservationists, had been intensively working on urban renewal and restoration projects for the city since the 1930s and had continued their work during the war. For political reasons, they rarely mentioned their pre-war activities after 1945. Admitting that they could work on their projects in wartime was taboo, as it could have been perceived as collaboration with the enemy.

My presentation will showcase some of the research findings from my doctoral dissertation, in which I argue that the manner in which Warsaw's monuments were reconstructed in fact evinced a unique mixture of contrasting tendencies. The attempt to somehow recover the shape of the city from the time before industrialization in the second half of the 19th century, recalling the vaunted epoch of Polish economic and political prosperity, coexisted with socialist aesthetic doctrines and new building technologies.

[1] Getter, Marek, Straty ludzkie i materialne w powstaniu warszawskim, in: Biuletyn Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej, 43/44, 8/9 (2004), p. 62–74.

Warsaw's Old Town was almost completely devastated.

Warsaw should not exist anymore. No other European city was as hard-hit during World War II as Warsaw, whose destruction was mostly not a direct result of war, but the outcome of a systematic campaign to annihilate the city and its architecture. By the end of the war, 65 percent of the city and 84 percent on the left Vistula bank, where the city center is situated, had been demolished.^[1] Warsaw's Old Town was almost completely devastated.



Although, as one of the Allies, Poland officially belonged to the victors, politically it lost the war. Under Soviet control after 1945, Poland lost not only its independence, but also half of its territory in the East including two metropolises crucial to Polish culture: Lwów/L'viv and Wilno/Vilnius. The reconstruction of Warsaw was supposed to be a compensation for this loss and a way to divert attention from political issues.

At the end of January 1945, three architects – Jan Zachwatowicz, Lech Niemojewski and Marian Szychalski (Warsaw's first post-war mayor) – came to Warsaw and decided to reconstruct its monuments in their historical forms.^[2] Despite the difficult political situation and dramatic conditions, it was possible to rebuild the city, including its historical center, within 10 years. A decisive role in this process was played by Jan Zachwatowicz, the organizer of the Warsaw Reconstruction Office and Poland's chief state conservationist, who had already begun his career as an architect before the war. Due to his rhetorical skills and political connections, he managed to integrate the reconstruction program of Warsaw's monuments into the propaganda program of the socialist party.^[3]

My paper showcases some of the main findings of my doctoral dissertation, which concentrates on the reconstruction of the historical city center of Warsaw: the old town, the new town and the so called Royal Route including Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, Nowy Świat Street and Ujazdowskie Avenue, which, together, comprise a coherent structure. Although at first glance some parts of Warsaw's city center resemble their originals, the architects did not intend an exact reconstruction of pre-war Warsaw. Scholars have shown that these differences stemmed from political ideology; a logical interpretation, since Warsaw was supposed to be rebuilt as the capital of a new socialist state.^[4] In fact, as I argue in my dissertation, changes in architecture and urban design had their origin in plans and ideas Polish architects

[2] Niemojewski, Lech, O odbudowie Warszawy Studia warszawskie, in: Warszawa stolica Polski Ludowej, 11/2, Warszawa 1972, p. 235.

[3] Bierut, Bolesław, The 6-year plan for the reconstruction of Warsaw, Warszawa 1949.

[4] Herber, Grażyna Ewa, Wiederaufbau der Warschauer Altstadt nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Im Spannungsfeld zwischen denkmalpflegerischen Prinzipien, politischer Indienstnahme und gesellschaftlichen Erwartungen, Bamberg 2014; Majewski, Piotr, Ideologia i konserwacja: architektura zabytkowa w Polsce w czasach socrealizmu, Warszawa 2009; Żuchowski, Tadeusz J., Der Wiederaufbau der Städte in Polen nach 1945, in: Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa und der nationale Diskurs, ed. Robert Born, Vol. 1, Berlin 2004.

had worked on and discussed in the 1930s and 1940s, before and during the war, and even at the beginning of the 20th century.

In discussing continuities in Polish architecture and city planning before and after the war, historians tend to focus on modernist architects, who (like their European colleagues) welcomed wartime destruction as a blessing in disguise.^[5] Yet it remains taboo to discuss the fact that conservationists – whose main aim should be the protection of monuments – also perceived destruction as a possibility to introduce improvements. The second chief finding of my dissertation is that the reconstruction campaign that took place in Warsaw after the war, despite its extraordinary character and the socialist political system it was supposed to serve, contained many similarities with West European architectural theory and practice.

I will illustrate the practical implications of the fact that reconstruction of Warsaw began before the war with some examples. Since 1980, Warsaw's city center has been listed as a UNESCO heritage site and is regarded until today as a synonym for the most faithful, comprehensive and spacious undertaking in the history of architectural reconstructions. Most publications that deal with the reconstruction of the Warsaw old town feature a photo of the market square, which was indeed rebuilt precisely according to its pre-war form. This image has encouraged a perception that reconstruction of the whole historic center was almost perfect. In fact, well before the war the whole market square had been perceived as a national monument, because it was one of the few places in Warsaw to maintain its appearance during Poland's partition between Prussia, Austria and Russia in the 19th century. Most of Warsaw's districts developed rapidly under Russian occupation and its condition was criticized by the architects and by the art historians in the interwar period.^[6]

Beyond the market square, plenty of changes appeared across the old town, most notably as development was made less dense. Although the street network was preserved, most of the development inside city blocks was not rebuilt and was even demolished after the war. Façades also underwent alterations. Some tenements were adjusted in their height to neighboring buildings. These changes aimed to improve both the living conditions for old town inhabitants and for the architectural aesthetics. Although officially such interventions sought to eliminate 19th-century capitalist development, they were typical for 1930s and 1940s urban renewal programs in Germany, Italy and Switzerland.^[7]

Although forgotten in Polish architectural history, the same sort of urban renewal had been plotted in 1938 for the Warsaw historical center by the municipal planning department at the Technical University of Warsaw, where Jan Zachwatowicz was working as an assistant professor.^[8] No architect who later reconstructed the old town ever mentioned working on these plans before the war. Although the project was not realized before the war, Jan Zachwatowicz had attempted to overhaul the quarter by demolishing the 19th-century developments in courtyards and replacing them with green spaces while rebuilding a part of a medieval city wall in the Warsaw old town in the late 1930s. Street-facing houses, which often suffered poor living conditions, were to be renovated.^[9] Ultimately, Zachwatowicz managed to redevelop one urban block in this way.

[5] Gutschow, Niels; Klain, Barbara, *Vernichtung und Utopie. Stadtplanung Warschau 1939–1945*, Hamburg 1994.

[6] Przybylski, Czesław, *Zagadnienie urbanistyczno-architektoniczne Warszawy*, in: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 10/5 (1934), p. 146–151; Totwiński, Tadeusz, *Warszawa jako stolica. Przemówienie dyskusyjne*, in: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 10/5 (1934), p. 154; Lauterbach, Alfred, *Potrzeby estetyczne Warszawy*, Warszawa 1915.

[7] Fischli, Melchior, *Geplante Altstadt*. Zürich, 1920–1960, Zürich 2012; Vinken, Gerhard, *Zone Heimat. Altstadt im modernen Städtebau*, Berlin 2010; Petz, Ursula von, *Stadtplanung und Stadterneuerung in Italien*, in: *Die alte Stadt. Zeitschrift für Stadtgeschichte, Stadtsoziologie und Denkmalpflege*, 34/3 (2007), S. 221–230; Petz, Ursula von, *Stadtsanierung im Dritten Reich*. Dargestellt an ausgewählten Beispielen, Dortmund 1987; Pusbach, Birte, *Stadt als Heimat*, Köln, Hamburg 2006.

[8] *Stare Miasto*. Zakład Architektury Polskiej, 27.03.1938, Akta Nieruchomości, No. 8904, Warsaw State Archive.

[9] Zachwatowicz, Jan, *Mury obronne Warszawy i prace nad ich odstonięciem*, in: *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki i Kultury*, 5, 3/4 (1937), p. 279–297; Przytkowski, Tadeusz; Zachwatowicz, Jan, *Mury obronne Warszawy*, Warszawa.

A featured photo of Warsaw's market square.



The extent of wartime destruction meant this method could be applied on a bigger scale. Conservationists prepared a list of tenements that were not to be rebuilt or were destined to be demolished, even if the legal owners of the properties had survived the war and aimed to rebuild their houses. Having begun reconstruction of the wall in the 1930s, Zachwatowicz planned its full reconstruction after 1945 – an

Development of Warsaw's Districts under Russian occupation.





Some tenements were adjusted in their height to neighboring buildings.



endeavor that demanded creating free space on both its sides. The same strategy from the old town was introduced in the new town, where an intense 19th-century development led architects to invent the architecture of the tenements while rebuilding it. A redevelopment project for this part of the city had already been prepared in 1936, but could only be realized after the war.

Another interesting example is St. John's Cathedral, which received a new façade and Gothic revival interior design in the 19th century. Zachwatowicz had already been discussing a new project for the cathedral with the responsible priest during the German occupation, between 1943 and 1944.^[10] The cathedral was rebuilt according to his plans in an invented Mazovian style. Although in this case the leading argument was the German character of 19th-century architecture, at that time gothic revival was not appreciated by conservationists for aesthetic reasons.

[10] Jan Zachwatowicz's Archive, No. 2351, Archive of the Warsaw Castle.

Plans for Nowy Świat Street, the first street fully rebuilt after the war, also began during the war. Due the fact that Nowy Świat was one of Warsaw's most destroyed streets in September 1939, plans to renew the whole street were ready a year later. All the details of the 1940 plan were implemented after the war thanks to Jan Zachwatowicz, who was one of the architects working on this project.^[11]

[11] Popiołek, Małgorzata, Powojenna odbudowa ulicy Nowy Świat w Warszawie, Warszawa 2012.

Some houses that failed to match the desired vision of the city's past were demolished after the war. Messalka House in Krakowskie Przed-

[12] Ministerstwo Sztuki i Kultury, *Opieka nad zabytkami i ich konserwacja*, Warszawa 1920.

[13] Szwankowski, Eugeniusz, *Warszawa: rozwój urbanistyczny i architektoniczny*, Warszawa 1952.

Redevelopment of one urban block by Zachwatowicz.

[14] Krakowskie Przedmieście 16/18, WAZ BOS, No. 309, Warsaw State Archive.

miescie had already been a synonym for bad taste before the war. In a 1920 booklet on heritage conservation published by the ministry of culture and education, a picture of Messalka House illustrated how 19th-century architecture disfigured older quarters.^[12] A picture of the same house appeared in a 1952 book on the history of Warsaw urban development as an example of the bad bourgeois taste of capitalist architecture.^[13] As of 1945, the walls of the front building of the Messalka house burned down, whereas the right and the back wing of the house remained completely intact. The 1945 plan foresaw demolition of the front part of the house. However, right after the war it was re-occupied by its pre-war users, who began a battle with authorities and conservationists to prevent demolition. After the ground floor of the front part of the house was renovated, conservationists put security bars on the windows and doors to keep people away from the building.^[14] The front of the house was eventually torn down and replaced

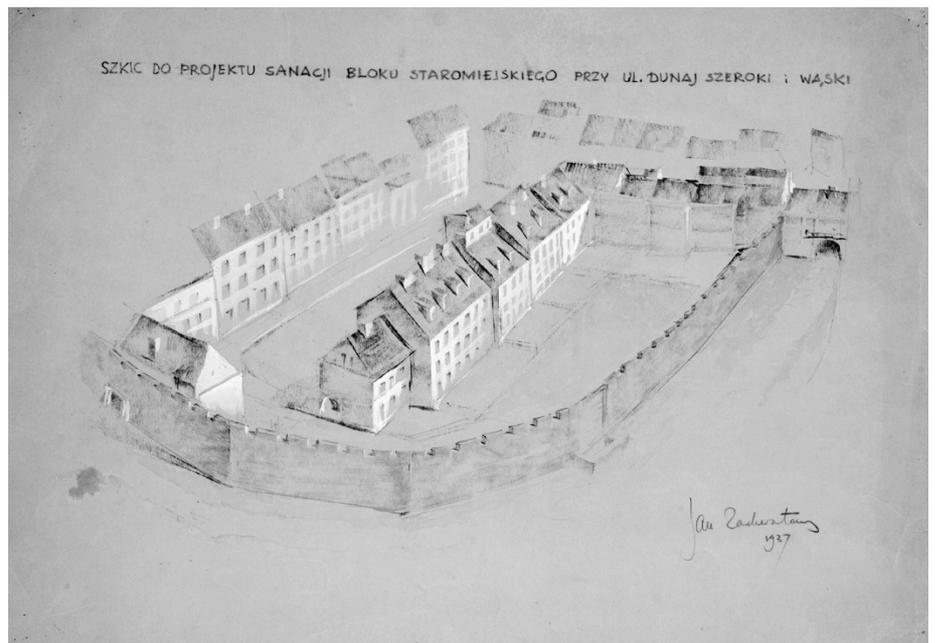


Fig. 7

by two smaller buildings that replicated those which had stood on the site in the 18th century. The back wings of the 19th-century tenement remained and are still partially visible from the street.

Although in the history of architecture Warsaw represents the most accurate historical reconstruction after a war, my dissertation shows that the post-war reconstruction of the Warsaw city center did not aim to reproduce pre-war architecture. One reason for this is the fact that the story of the reconstruction of Warsaw's city center did not begin at the moment of its destruction, but much earlier, as the city became Polish in 1918 after a century of Russian rule. Upon Polish independence after World War I, all traces of this foreign hegemony were supposed to disappear from the Warsaw cityscape. Politicians and architects sought to rewind the historical clock to the last prosperous era in Polish history before partition: the times of Poland's last king, Stanislaus II August Poniatowski. Both modernization and "polonization" featured in the interwar political program of Warsaw urban planning, which could not be realized due to the difficult political and economic situation of the young Polish Republic.

Paradoxically, plans to renew and restore Warsaw that had been initiated before the war and honed during the war were implemented



Gothic revival was not appreciated by conservationists for aesthetic reasons.

due to the new political system in 1945. Warsaw did not present an exception in the architectural history. Whereas great urban and architectural projects are usually prepared in democratic political systems, their implementation often takes place under authoritarian regimes, where weakened protections of private property and even its nationalization, concentration of money for great representational projects and undemocratic leaders give architects totally new opportunities.

Those undemocratic tools were eagerly used by the Polish architects, who realized their projects even when they caused the eviction of tenants amid a context of immense urban destruction and housing shortage. Architects were obsessed with finally building the city they had dreamed of: an artificially homogeneous space without 19th-century urbanization, revivalist architecture, capitalist influence, traces of Russian occupation, signs of the poor, or Jews. It was an attempt at aesthetic, economic, political, social, and ethnic purification.

Even though Polish architects often posed as the voice of the nation and sought to reconstruct the Polish character of the city, their work relied upon plenty of European ideas, such as German reform architecture, Heimatstil, protection of landscapes, and modern zoning and hygiene.

After the war, Polish architects were not only interested in the work of their foreign colleagues but, despite the Iron Curtain, had actually remained a part of the community of European architects. Surprisingly, one reason this was possible was the partition of Poland until 1918. Polish architects had studied abroad and in different partition zones (Prussian/German, Russian, Habsburg) and gained knowledge from different schools and universities. Ideas from Germany played an essential role in the creation of the renewal program for Warsaw city center.

Because of the constantly changing political situation, Polish architects were well versed in dealing with different rulers. They knew how to present their projects in a way that suited the reigning political system: first under Russian hegemony, then the German occupation during World War I, followed by the interwar authoritarian Polish

Sanacja regime, the Germans during World War II, and finally under communist politicians appointed by the Soviet Union. To manipulate the latter so they could realize their aims, they used Polish-patriotic, anti-German, anti-Russian, hygienic, technical, aesthetic, anti-capitalist, social and socialist arguments. The combination of arguments depended on the given political situation.

While Polish architects and conservationists could finally give Warsaw's historic center its "proper form," their European colleagues preferred to rebuild their destroyed cities in a modernist way. In fact, the Warsaw reconstruction program had much more in common with reconstruction campaigns after World War I, as architects rebuilt historical architecture while improving the aesthetics of buildings and modernizing urban structures.^[15]

[15] A blessing in disguise. War and town planning in Europe 1940–1945, ed. Jörn Düwel, Niels Gutschow, Berlin 2013.

The post-war reconstruction of monuments in Warsaw and other cities like Gdansk or Wroclaw has influenced how historical architecture is perceived in contemporary Poland. Public perceptions accustomed themselves to "accurate" monuments, which should not be old and rotten, as well as the demolition and reconstruction of a monument on another site. This tendency is in obvious conflict with principles of heritage conservation prevalent in Europe since 1900, which focuses on the substance of the object, together with its visible layers over time. These layers determine the value of a monument; they should be protected and made visible. A legacy of the reconstruction campaign after World War II is an ongoing tendency to reconstruct monuments that did not exist for a long period of time, as well as to demolish old architecture and rebuild it as a simulation on the same place again, regardless of its historical substance.^[16]

[16] Omilanowska, Matgorzata, Rekonstruktion statt Original – das historische Zentrum von Warschau, in: Informationen zur Raumentwicklung, 3/4 (2011), p. 227–236.

The post-war reconstructions has also distorted perception of pre-war Warsaw, masking problems like poor living conditions, urban hygiene issues, and the great social gap between the rich and the poor who made up most of the city population. This idealized vision of the pre-war city is still present in the popular culture.

The back wings of the 19th-century tenement remained and are still partially visible from the street.



Figures

1. Market square in the old town, 1945 (Photo: L. Sempoliński)
2. Jan Zachwatowicz 1900–1983 (W. Miernicki, 1950-1956, NAC 20-117-2)
3. Market square in the old town today (Photo: M. Popiołek-Roßkamp)
4. Warsaw in the year 1935 (http://www.mapa.um.warszawa.pl/mapaApp1/mapa?service=mapa_historyczna&L=pl&X=7502805.127594725&Y=5788955.369500488&S=7&O=0&T=0&komunikat=off)
5. Market square in the new town, before 1945 (Referat Gabarytow, 5526, Archive of the Mazovian Conservationist)
6. Market square in the new town, today (Photo: M. Popiołek-Roßkamp)
7. Reconstruction and redevelopment project by Jan Zachwatowicz, 1937 (Mat IIIb – 472, Museum of Architecture in Wrocław)
8. St. John's Cathedral before 1939 (Photo: H. Poddębski, F.63501/II, National Library)
9. St. John's Cathedral reconstructed after the war (Photo: M. Popiołek-Roßkamp)
10. Visible back wings of the 19th-century Messalka house, Krakowskie Przedmieście Street (Photo: K. Mordyński)