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## **The Social Creation of Urban Space in Socrealism: Main Actors and Dominant Spatial Forms**

### **Introduction**

This text represents a kind of *post factum* summing up of the empirical research conducted in four towns of southern Poland (Tychy, Siemianowice, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Ruda Śląska) in the years 1985—1990. The object of these investigations was to:

- identify the most important actors in the social creation of the urban space under socrealism;
- reconstruct the town planning and architectural ideologies and doctrines;
- describe the prevailing spatial forms and the social consequences of their realization.

Although these studies were carried out in only a few towns, the conclusions formulated from the results achieved would appear to have a more general and universal application. Indeed they may, with a certain caution, be taken as valid in all the regions of Poland.

### **Social creation of the urban space — preliminary remarks**

Almost twenty years ago the French sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, postulated how space is created socially while its ultimate configuration is the result

of individual and communal activity.<sup>1</sup> He was not referring to geographical space but to cultural and anthropological space. Accepted in French intellectual circles and now frequently used in Polish professional publications,<sup>2</sup> the expression, **social creation of space**, is essentially the process of restructuring of physical space into a cultural and anthropogenic space. Socialization of physical space is manifested in the presence of people's everyday life and customary habits, their power and strengths, as well as their weaknesses and decline.

The social creation of the urban space is neither haphazard nor unrestricted. In every epoch and in every political-economic formation there are numerous causes regulating this creative process. Therefore it is difficult not only to classify these causes but also to make a definitive claim as to their hierarchical importance. These causes, however, have an unusually significant influence on technical-technological achievements and advancement of civilization. Moreover, these achievements and advancements are political, and we must deal with the Marxist concept **production potential**. The level of this development governs the nature and quality of spatial forms which are created and the significance ascribed to them. The creative possibilities that were and are possessed by **preindustrial societies**, are quite different from either **industrial**, post-socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe or **post-industrial**, countries in Western Europe or the U.S.A.

The process of creating urban space is equally important as the system of government and authority which provides the given social order. Class and elite sections of the population dominating in the economic (ownership laws), political (government, authority and subservient relations), and ideological (axionormative transmission relations) spheres — have significantly influenced the type and progress of the social creation of space. Members of the ruling class form, propagate or even impose an ideological system, including also the ideology of the town and the urban concept. By controlling political power or forming influential pressure groups, they legitimate their own actions. For example, industrial architecture has represented the spatial expression of the technical-technological revolution and the domination the **new industrialist**

<sup>1</sup> H. Lefebvre, *A droit à la ville, suivi de l'espace et politique* (Paris 1972); idem, *La production de l'espace* (Paris 1979).

<sup>2</sup> B. Jałowiecki, "Percepcja, waloryzacja i przyswajanie przestrzeni. Szkic z socjologii przestrzeni" ["Perception, Evaluation and Assimilation of Space. An Outline of the Sociology of Space"], in *Percepcja, waloryzacja i przyswajanie przestrzeni [Perception, Evaluation and Assimilation of Space]*, ed. B. Jałowiecki (Warszawa 1988), pp. 5—83; M. S. Szczepański, "Społeczne wytwarzanie przestrzeni i generowanie znaczeń" ["Social Creation of Space and Generating of Meanings"], in *Przestrzeń znacząca [Meaningful Space]*, ed. J. Wódz (Katowice 1989), pp. 154—179; idem, "'Miasto socjalistyczne' i świat społeczny jego mieszkańców" ["A New 'Socialist City' and the Social Situation of Its Inhabitants"] (Warszawa 1991).

class. This imposing palaces building symbolized the power and might of a single ruler or a whole dynasty. In post-revolutionary Russia monumental buildings of socialism, symbols of the "new brave world," replaced orthodox churches and monuments.

The ideologies and doctrines acknowledged by designers, architects, town planners also determined the social creation of space. They are constrained in how they implement their own conceptions due to the available economic and natural resources as well as to the pertinent political relations and ideologies (in the case of the socialist countries), but there also remains some freedom of action resulting from loopholes in institutional regulations.

A particular kind of constraint in the process of social creation of space is represented by not only the existing physical space and its configuration but also the already existing spatial forms. For a town is always what may be termed a "long lasting structure"<sup>3</sup>. Within the space of the town are expressed secular trends which characterize the historical evolution of the town's social system. Urban space is a communal memory, handed on and cultivated by successive generations. In the process of creating this space it would be impossible not to take into account already existing buildings, thoroughfares and parks. This circumstance is particularly true when they have historical or traditional value and constitute an objective, spatial expression of historical development. Moreover, their existence may be considered as undesirable or not in agreement with the official ideology and town planning doctrine. In such situations, urban space may be radically transformed or simply destroyed to eliminate ideological contradictions. Some examples are the rebuilding of 19th century Paris carried out by Georges Haussmann, the changes effected in the appearance of Soviet towns following the October Revolution, or in introduction of a new political system.

After discussing the determinants of social space creation, we cannot ignore the social expectations and communal requirements for specific spatial, architectural and town planning forms. Indisputably, these expectations may be shaped by the use of indoctrination, propaganda and advertising. It is foolish, however, to believe in the myth of manipulative education and accept that virtually all human needs, including ideas on the most desirable spatial forms, are entirely plastic. The social creation of architectural and town planning forms must be related, at least to a certain degree, with the awareness and expectation of both individuals and community groups. If these social concerns are ignored by architects and planners, there arises a barrier, difficult to surmount, between the designed purposes of spatial forms and their actual community use. For example, government

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<sup>3</sup> P. F. Braudel, *Histoire et sciences sociales: la longue durée. Annales: economies, sociétés, civilisations* (Paris 1958).

officials have unsuccessfully attempted to settle the nomadic peoples of Libya and Mongolia in permanent towns or settlements which are frequently constructed according to the most up-to-date canons of town planning and architecture. Interestingly, these attempts were made with the help of Polish designers, town planners and architects.

This conceptual sketch of the social creation of urban space should help to identify the principal actors under these political-economic conditions. This analysis may also assist in the reconstruction of their accepted architectural and town planning ideologies and doctrines which shape their preferred spatial designs and actual built results.

### **“Socrealism” — actors and ideologies**

The term “socrealism,” real socialism is used in Poland to describe the formative political and economic period between 1944—1990. This concept is sometimes synonymous with *dependent socialism* and *communism*. The adjective, **real**, indicates the unmistakable distance dividing this kind of socialism and the ideal propositions put forward in the writings of 19th and 20th century thinkers such as Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Rosa Luxemburg and Nikolaj Bukharin. Real socialism accentuates the spectacular differences between Eastern European socialism and the democratic socialism which was put into practice in certain Western countries, especially in Scandinavia. The period of real socialism in Poland was begun with a small group of communists backed by the Red Army who seized political power and liberated our country from the Nazi occupation. As a result, Poland became a Soviet victim in their export of the socialist revolution. This experimental period in Poland’s history was brought to a close by the first free presidential election in November and December, 1990, and by the choice of Lech Wałęsa for this office.

The changes in Poland’s political and economic system and the introduction of real socialism rules affected every area social, cultural and economic life. As a result, radical alterations also took place in the process of social creation of the urban space. New political actors introduced a new ideology of the town, a new urban reality and new spatial forms.

This new system imported from the Soviet Union was by nature total and totalitarian. The communist party and state leaders, the so-called “nomenclature,” had a monopoly of political power and never-permitted institutional opposition. Moreover, they exercised control over virtually all community actions. Thus this new political class became the principal actor in the social creation of space. Architects and town planners were required to become

the implementers of communists' totalitarian spatial projects — socialist in content and national in form — as it was formulated in communist propaganda, while the chief instrument of realization was the ubiquitous plan. This plan became an important foundation of real socialism, and the essence of its required directives limited or simply eliminated large scale movements and spontaneous processes not subject to the regulations laid down in "the plan." The communist party was also committed to the conviction that socialist development and the creation of the urban space must be based exclusively on the principles of rational planning. Government official treated spontaneous processes, which were not envisaged in the plan and previously defined as socially undesirable, as being insignificant and peripheral. In most of the spatial plans drawn up, government official simultaneously expressed the dictum that in real socialism decision makers were able to foresee the great majority of activities which should, at least to a certain degree, be subject to institutional control. This principle led government officials to "overinstitutionalisation of urban life," by limiting the spatial behavior of the inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> Many socialist planners certainly claimed that almost everything can be foreseen and planned, and their position was the reason that extreme applications became social projects, which shaped new modes of political behavior and social ties.<sup>5</sup> In this paradigm of spatial creation the communist party assigned politicians, town planners and architects the role of Plato's demiurges, transforming an imperfect world into a perfect one. At the same time, these decision makers assumed that social life in real socialism is shaped by external rather than internal changes in the society. They saw the critical influences to be the overall planner, the plan, the architect and town planner, the planning design office. Hence we had an extraordinary and positively unprecedented reduction of what is social to that which is technical. A paradoxical situation emerged. Planning, which was designed as an instrument for elimination or limiting spontaneous movements, in effects stimulated them.

Central planning authorities ultimately intervened. The Ministry of Spatial Development and the Central Planning Office laid down bureaucratic norms, technical specifications and town planning and architectural standards. They made arbitrary decisions not only on the future number of town inhabitants and apartments sizes, but also the thickness of walls, the number of building crane operations per 100 cubic meters and the number of sculpture per hectare.

<sup>4</sup> K. Sowa, *Miasto — środowisko — mieszkanie* [City — Environment — Housing] (Kraków 1988).

<sup>5</sup> B. Jałowiecki, "Percepcja, waloryzacja i przyswajanie przestrzeni..." ["Perception, Evaluation and Assimilation of space..."]

Under socrealism the urban space ceased to be treated as a rare and valuable economic property. The new political system eliminated the mechanisms of the market economy and replaced them with an economy which was controlled centrally by the state and its key institutions. Government officials eliminated land rent, which led to an irrational disposition of territory and ignored self-evident principles of economics. As an example, large industrial plants, the symbols of socialist industrialization, incurred virtually no costs for land acquisition, building construction and investment loans. The state effectively made the land as a gift or required a minimal payment for it. The price paid for land and the construction of the Katowice steelworks (the largest metallurgical complex in Europe) or the coal mine "Ziemowit" did not usually amount to more than 1% of total investment costs. What was even worse, the authorities of the socialist industrial plants, who were well aware of their privileged position in this economic system, operated outside the restraints of the law with complete impunity for many years. Not surprising, planning "designed as a universal tool for controlling the political economy not only proved to be completely inadequate but also contributed greatly to the defeat of the real socialism system. Instead of the anticipated order and efficiency, the central plan brought disorientation and chaos, because it eliminated the objective regulator of all economic operations, the market factor."<sup>6</sup>

Under socrealism the dominating architectural feature became the **large housing complexes**, sited not only on the outskirts of the town but also right in the town's central areas. In a standart housing estate, which was constructed of large concrete prefabricated panels and elements, government officials housed from twenty thousand to tens of thousands of people. The underlying political purposes in these building projects which dominated Polish towns from the 1960s to the present, was and still is quite clear. Government officials guaranteed the simple reproduction of the workforce and insured workers their elementary conditions of existence. In fact, however, these **large housing complexes** were an expressed desire by government officials to rationalize and intensify industrial production and to exploit the local workforce. This highly antisocial type of building project is facelessly uniform, without style, stifling and disgracefully neglectful of communal infrastructure. The residents suffer from the lack of shops, service points, cinemas, theatres, restaurants, coffee houses, telephones, bus services. This deplorable deficit in the complexes' community infrastructure was usually compensated by planners who transferred daily shopping to the town's center. And thus the **large housing complex** became a scene with no community actors. Sjoerd Groenman's concept of the "empty zone" is appropriate here, because it stresses

<sup>6</sup> Idem, "Przedmowa" ["Preface"], in K. Herbst, *Spoleczne uwarunkowania planowania przestrzennego* [*Social Determinants of Urban Planning*] (Warszawa 1990), pp. 5--8.

the lack of individual and communal identification with the amorphous space of the large housing complexes and of inhabitants who concentrate narrowly on the quality of their own apartment space.<sup>7</sup> The apartment becomes a “concrete stairway, a travesty of privacy and peace,” as one of the inhabitants of tested Polish towns expressed it.

The spatial domination of **large housing complexes** in Polish towns is no accidental. It is a direct consequence of the guiding ideological principle of real socialism. In practice, real socialism demands that collective, class and group interests should always take precedence, while the role of individual needs was reduced to a minimum. “The individual is nothing, the individual is zero” wrote Vladimir W. Majakowski (1893—1930), the official bard of the Soviet revolution. In this way, government official assessed the actual housing needs of individuals as members of large human populations, and the **large housing complexes** became the architectural expression of their official attitude. At the same time, in the socialist ideology the single-family house was thought of as a relic of capitalism, a hateful reminder of the past epoch, an expression of bourgeois individualism.

The people who settled into these **large housing complexes**, were largely unable to choose their place of residence. With the authority of bureaucratic regulations, housing cooperative managers and minor officials had the bureaucratic authority to locate people irrespective of individual preferences. Powerless residents, whom were assigned apartments in the **housing complexes**, constituted a heterogeneous social community. As a result, they were less willing to complain or object, were easy to control and were susceptible to manipulation. The municipal authorities basically ignored the public. Justifying the construction of these housing projects, these authorities maintained that they were creating in the quickest possible time the foundations of new, egalitarian and socialist local communities.

These large housing complexes may also be the partial result of applying the maxims incorporated in the Athens Charter to Polish conditions.<sup>8</sup> These maxims were in close agreement with the directives of real socialism since the Athens Charter questioned the logic of creating a capitalist town which embodied all of the hodgepodge inconveniences of the industrial era. Proposing an urban revolution, the Athens Charter actually purported a social revolution in which a vital role was assigned to town planners, architects and designers. So it is understandable that Polish signatories to the Athens Charter, as well as left wing architects and towns planners in their circle, hopefully welcomed real socialism. The new political-economic framework

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<sup>7</sup> S. Groenman, “*Grenzen des Community Development in der Stadt*,” in *Soziologie und Gesellschaft in den Niederlanden* (Neuwied 1965).

<sup>8</sup> M. S. Szczepański, “‘Miasto socjalistyczne’...” [“‘A New Socialist City’...”]



offered them a real opportunity to implement their broad spatial conceptions, from the scale of a large districts to a whole town. Moreover, these professionals had the possibility of executing their building plans by prefabricated methods, similar to factory production.<sup>9</sup> Kazimierz Wejchert, the well-known Polish designer from the era of real socialism, epitomized this attitude when he wrote: "The socialist town can be beautiful. The socialist system based on an economic plan makes possible the planned composition of both the town as a whole and its various parts. Here no longer will be observed the capitalist pursuit of profit, land rent. The town will cease to be the reflection of the antagonism of systems based on exploitation."<sup>10</sup>

The town of real socialism, with clearly distinguishable functional areas and cubist type buildings, was erected on the foundation of a typical Corbusier design and a reputable module. The ideas of French town planners, when applied in Poland, led government officials to set up huge "home factories," which endlessly produced the same concrete panels. This factory mentality led designers forcibly to an irrational, uneconomic and a cultural process of creating spatial forms which were unrelated to cultural traditions of the region or town. According to their declarations, authorities expected the implementation of these plans to be accompanied by the three great imperatives of modern socialist town planning and architecture: More greenery! More open space! More sunshine! Instead of garden-towns, they unfortunately provided a conglomeration of grey, repulsive bunkers. These buildings were deprived of all architectural details, were located chaotically amongst dwarf trees and sparse grass patches, and engendering feelings of frustration and despair. Paradoxically it was the Athens Charter, founded on pioneer designs for the garden city and in agreement with the imperatives of real socialism, that initiated the prolonged process of destroying Polish towns. This ideology led to the atrophy of the small street, the friendly buildings, the variety of spatial forms. Towns of the postsocialist countries, particularly in Poland, serve as dramatic examples of the mindless application of Modernism.

The town planning and architectural projects in the era of real socialism, such as **large housing complexes**, were contradictory expressions toward older town buildings dating from the 19th to the early 20th century. Pre-socialist buildings, now of historical value, had served both utilitarian and symbolic purposes: utilitarian and symbolic. These buildings formed a nucleus which not only concentrated the upper classes and the local bourgeoisie but also personified their political and economic standing. After World War II, i.e. after the establishment of real socialism, government officials eliminated

<sup>9</sup> B. Jałowicki, "Percepcja, waloryzacja i przyswajanie przestrzeni..." ["Perception, Evaluation and Assimilation of Space..."]

<sup>10</sup> K. Wejchert, *Piękno miasta* [*The Beauty of the City*], *Miasto*, 1, 1 (1951), pp. 10–18.

some of these buildings from the urban landscape, while restoration work on the remaining buildings was strictly limited. They justified their actions in many ways. Most frequently these officials asserted that older urban buildings represented a relic of building forms which were based on capitalist social inequalities and class exploitation. In fact the true cause for demolishing of many older quarters was the search by governmental officials for free space in which they could site modern, large housing complexes.

In this era of characterless, uniform architecture of Polish towns, single-family homes have a special political place in real socialism. The mere fact of living in them, except for a very few substandard houses, was a conspicuous privilege. In the monotonous landscape of the Polish towns, districts of single-family houses are distinguished by a more individual style of architectural details. They often indicate the higher social, professional, economic, or in certain cases, political status of their owners. Moreover, these districts are usually located in the ecologically better areas of town, close to greenery or parkland, and usually away from industrial plants. The enclave atmosphere of single-family houses evoke feelings of relative privilege among residents who must live in the **large housing complexes**. Residents in single-family house areas have less anonymous social relations, and they hold suspicious attitudes toward outsiders (fear of theft and burglary), which initiates and speeds up their forming an integrated local community. On the other hand, it is very seldom that residents in the **large housing complexes** display these communal processes. The unsuccessful social experiment with real socialism in Poland is now terminated. Nevertheless, its legacy will be with us for a long time. No solution has been found to the dramatic question of Poland's housing deficit, despite very great efforts, and hundreds of thousands of people still hopelessly await the chance of their own home or apartment. Unrestored historic buildings are decaying, while the rapidly and carelessly erected **large housing complexes** undergo accelerated technical degradation. Crime as well as the feelings of alienation and social isolation become accentuated in these complexes, and residents are frustrated and spontaneously breaks out in acts of revolt. The lack of secular, integrational institutions has made the Roman Catholic church a key social and cultural institution, the principal source of individual and communal identification for a great many townspeople.

## Conclusions

Empirical investigations implemented in several towns of southern Poland over a number of years provided the basis for formulating certain theoretic-

tical-methodological conclusions. In the first place they gave definitive evidence that the urban space, that rare and priceless asset of both economic and also symbolical-cultural value, following the elimination of market mechanisms was left in the control of the political establishment operating at various levels. This favored nonrational and noneconomic decisions in spatial disposition, a specific kind of "allotting" of ground sites for the building of priority factories and industrial plants, etc. The imposed political system also created new institutional actors in the social creation of space: members of the political class (government officials) began to play the novel role of demiurges of the social reality. The instrument for the implementation of their spatial projections became here the omnipresent plan, grounded on rigorous and bureaucratically defined norms, compulsory standards governing town planning, architectural and technical-technological decisions. It is a paradox that this plan, designed to limit the range of spontaneous and uncontrolled processes in the town area, in actual fact stimulated such process. It also contributed to the resultant spatial chaos and thus — *per saldo* — to the collapse of the whole system.

In the implementational dimension the socialist town planning — architectural ideology led to functional zoning and the domination of spatial forms displaying primarily collectivism. Apart from the plan itself, the instruments enabling realization of these spatial projections were provided by the ubiquitous norms and prefabricated modules. **The plan, zoning, norms, modules, elimination of ground rent — this was the so-called paradigm for creating the urban space and the instruments permitting this process to be carried out.**

The dominant spatial form became the huge apartment block complexes, hailed as the answer to the drastic deficit. Their erections led to uniformity of the urban space, to the lack of style and to the frustration and aggression of the inhabitants. These socially and culturally sterile building projects became, however, the symbol of advance in civilization standards for many millions of people who described their housing conditions — before moving into the new blocks — as critical. In the attempts to evaluate so-called realism this obvious fact should not be overlooked, otherwise judgments passed will fail to be objective.

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Let us remember that real socialism in Poland no longer exists, but its social and spatial effects did not pass with its passing. Such political history gives us a dire warning against such socialist experiments and the enormous costs which they incur. We need to be fully aware of these dilemmas in order to avoid such errors in the future.