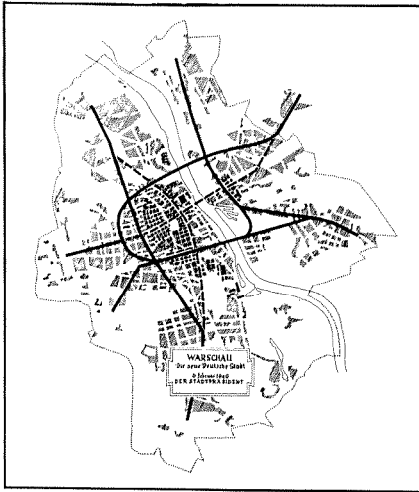


# Urbanism in Warsaw: Solidarity and Beyond

## Alexi Ferster Marmot



In 1981, 3,000 architects assembled in Warsaw for the triennial congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA). We came from 90 countries, from the prosperous West, from Eastern Europe, and from the Third World. We had gathered together primarily to discuss international trends in architecture but also to visit Warsaw. We found ourselves in Poland at the height of Solidarity's power, and could not help but be diverted by learning of Poland's struggle for economic and social reform. What sort of a city is Warsaw, and how is its development affected by the Solidarity movement?

The Second World War and its aftermath are the major forces shaping the city of Warsaw. Though the city was established 700 years ago on a defensible rise on the banks of the Vistula River, its built heritage was almost totally destroyed by the Nazis. By the end of the war, two-thirds of its inhabitants had been killed or died from disease and starvation, and 85 percent of its buildings and infrastructure had been devastated. Most damage to the city occurred not during the invasion, nor during the ghetto and Warsaw uprisings of 1942 and 1944, but during the last months of the war. Warsaw was then systematically dynamited and cleared following the plan prepared by the town planner, Pabst, for a segregated city of Polish laborers and German rulers with only one-tenth of the prewar population.

Liberation from the east by Soviet-led forces heralded a different future for the city. Several avant-garde Polish architects and planners had been active in CIAM and CIRPAC in the 1920s and 1930s. Under their influence, plans for Warsaw's redevelopment that had been prepared before the war or in underground studios during the years of occupation could now be implemented. All of Warsaw's land was nationalized for this purpose. As in Rotterdam and other bombed cities, young planners grasped the opportunity provided by wartime destruction to reshape Warsaw as a "functional city" characterized by separation of land uses; provision of extensive, recreational, open space; housing in tall blocks of flats; and emphasis on provision for rapid transportation. But at the same time, the need for connection with the past, for urban memory, led to the decision to reconstruct faithfully the Old Town, significant streets, palaces, and national monuments.

The reconstructed areas serve two important purposes. First, they are a concrete statement of the Poles' refusal to accept the elimination of their national heritage. Second, they provide relief from the large-scale, vehicle-dominated city of the present. In Old Warsaw one finds intimate pedestrian streets, well-proportioned squares, and a delightful variety of detail in building form, material, and decoration so lacking in the newer areas. Modern Warsaw does have

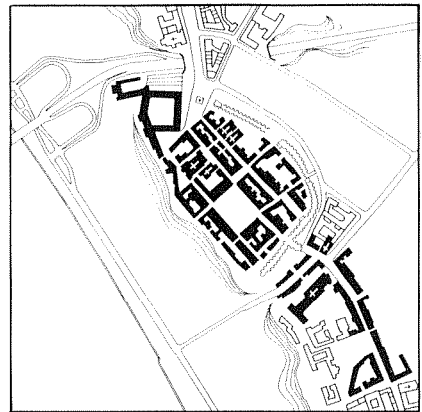
- 1 1940 Pabst Plan for Warsaw (black) Superimposed on the Pre-War City (hatched)
- 2 Marszalkowska Street, the Central Shopping Area of Post-War Warsaw, the "Functional City" of CIAM. (Photograph by the Polish Interpress Agency)

generous and well-landscaped parklands, but it is not a very human city. Roads are wide. City blocks are vast. Buildings are monotonous. Although the quantity of vehicular traffic is quite low, roads have been designed primarily for the speed of motor vehicles and pedestrians relegated a noisy walk to infrequent underpasses or crossings. Public transport is frequent and cheap, though overcrowded. Underground routes projected in every plan have yet to be realized though the last decade saw large investment in a major central-railway terminus and several motorway schemes.

Housing is provided in two main forms; the predominant mode is repetitive apartment blocks on large estates built from the industrialized panel systems that dominate the construction industry. Space standards within dwellings are low by comparison with Britain or the United States, but in the best estates the provision of community facilities—kindergartens, shops, schools—is generous and is well-integrated with the dwellings. Apartment buildings include stripped classical blocks built in the Socialist Realist 1950s, crudely functionalist assembly-line blocks of the 1960s and 1970s, and some recent examples of blocks of varied height, form, and color that allow residents to personalize balconies and ground-level gardens. The second mode of housing provision accounting for about 10 percent of new dwellings in Warsaw and

40 percent in the country is cooperatively- or owner-built, single-family housing on minimally serviced land purchased from farmers. The maximum allowable size is 1100 square feet per house, and the dwellings display the ingenuity and varied tastes of those working outside the main housing system.

Warsaw's town center is distinctly marked by the 700-foot high Palace of Culture in which the UIA Congress took place. Designed by the Russian architect Rudnyev and built between 1952 and 1955, it is remarkably similar to Moscow's University and Ukraina Hotel. The building was in fact a "gift" from the Soviet people to the Poles. Apologists claim that its bulk is due to Polish greed in requesting that the gift contain extensive accommodation for congresses, the Academy of Science, theaters, museums, and restaurants, and that its decoration is derived from Polish sources. But to most Poles the building is an inescapable symbol of the influence of their eastern neighbor. They resent the building's scale and aloofness, and the sterilization of several city blocks that it has annexed to surround itself with the biggest open carpark in central Europe. The act of designing changes to the building and its setting is one way of expressing disapproval. Several Polish architects have suggested new streets around the Palace composed of low-rise, mixed-use building (e.g., Andrzej Duszka's

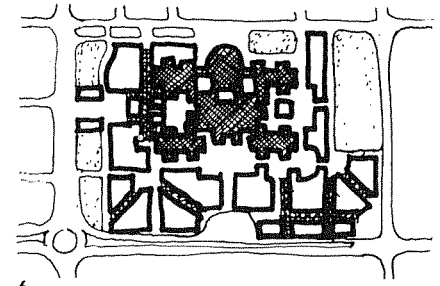
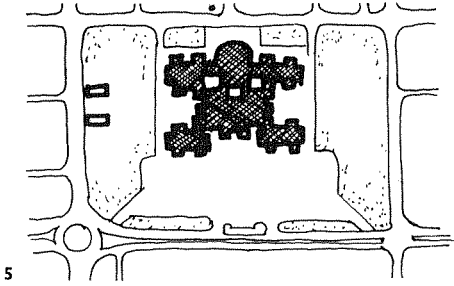


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- 3** Reconstructed Old City of Warsaw, a Contrast with the Vehicle-dominated, Post-War City
- 4** The Palace of Culture and Science, a Gift from the People of Russia (Photograph by E. Paszkowska)



project in *Architektura 78/79* and the project by the DOM group). Hong Kong students at the UIA Congress proposed that the building's plan area become an open square while fragments of the carved-up building could be redistributed to define parks, lakes, and new city blocks.

The rise of the Solidarity trade union in 1980 helped create a climate in which criticism of Warsaw's post-war urbanism could be unleashed. The DOM group ("Dom" is the Polish word for "house" and the group's name also stands for "house and city") of enthusiastic young designers produced a Charter printed by Solidarity in June 1981. In it they describe Warsaw as a city destroyed by war and also by the "meeting of contemporary urban doctrine with totalitarian socio-political doctrines." They argue against the repetition of forms on a large scale, against the pervasiveness of the architect-bureaucrat. They also plead for the right of people in self-governing communities to express their own personality through design, for increased attention to architectural aesthetics instead of architectural technology, for the creation of cities based on streets and squares, and for architectural practice to allow choice of client by architect and architect by client. "An architect," they eloquently state, "does not have to build at any cost; it is better to be silent than to lie or to give consent to the degradation of his art under the

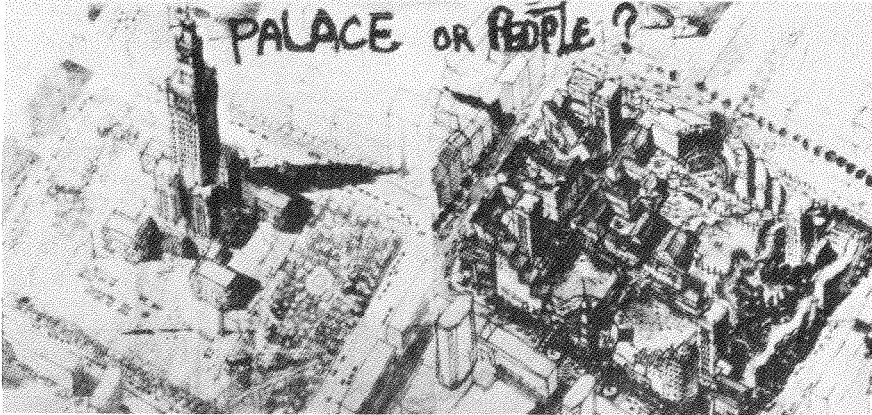
pressure of casually fulfilling needs."

There are many ways in which Solidarity began to influence architects and planners as trade union demands extended beyond the workplace to more general community issues. The Gdansk agreement, signed in August 1980 by Solidarity and the government, included demands for housing improvements, particularly a reduction in the waiting period for housing. In Cracow, the protest of workers against urban pollution from a large aluminum plant resulted in plant closure while anti-pollution measures were implemented. In architectural and planning offices throughout the country Solidarity branches were formed and began exposing incompetent or corrupt practices such as the private sale of newly completed cooperative housing to those not on the waiting list. They also began questioning the professional standing and integrity of their bosses and replacing political appointees by democratically elected candidates. The branches actively sought the means of making local planning and local government more responsive to the needs of residents.

Before much change could be realized, the declaration of martial law in December 1981 abruptly terminated Solidarity's period of glory. Many were arrested for "subversive" activities. The spirit of open criticism of state failings

came to an end. Today Poland's economy is in tatters, the result of years of inept government policy exacerbated by the political upheaval since 1980. Investment in housebuilding and urban services is at a standstill. Far from meeting Solidarity's demands to shorten the waiting time for housing, official figures now suggest that there will be an absolute shortage of 4.5 million dwellings by 1990 even without upgrading existing stock or improving space standards.

Official policy now encourages housing cooperatives so that people will help construct their own homes rather than rely on state provision. Many organizations including architects criticize this policy. They argue that the policy cannot be implemented because the necessary institutional and financial arrangements have not been made. It is difficult to purchase land; serviced land is extremely scarce; building materials are desperately short; stagnant wages do not match the five-fold inflation in the price of materials; and few loans are available for housebuilding. Most people are reluctant to commit time and resources to private homes because they are uncertain about future attitudes to owner-builders in a socialist state. They fear being forced to pay large wealth-taxes on their homes or being victimized in other ways. It is likely that Polish cities and Warsaw, in particular, will see little expansion or improvement in the built fabric for many years until drastic



- 5 Existing Plan of the Palace of Culture**  
**6 DOM's Proposal to Encircle the Palace**  
 with Defined Streets and Arcades  
**7 Proposal by Hong Kong Students** for a  
 Recreational Area of Palace Fragments

improvements in the economy have been achieved. Solidarity's demands will seemingly remain unfulfilled.

At the close of the UIA Congress in 1981, the Warsaw Declaration of Architects was presented following the tradition of CIAM's 1933 Charter of Athens. At first glance the Warsaw Declaration appears to give no useful guidance to designers since it is filled with general pleas for unquestionable goods such as human welfare and international peace (e.g., "Governments should stop production for war and use their resources for the improvement of conditions for all humanity"). But buried within the statement are several departures from the urban design tenets of the Charter of Athens. While the earlier charter considered only the European city, the Warsaw Declaration is concerned equally with the problems of the emergent city in rapidly industrializing countries, and with the demands made by all urban dwellers on the natural environment. The need for energy-conscious cities is espoused. Instead of CIAM's functionally segregated city made up of distinct buildings,

we should "create integrated multi-functional environments treating each building as part of a continuum"; instead of destroying the past to revel in the new we should "protect and develop the heritage of the society . . . and maintain continuity of cultural development"; instead of designing for the needs of the private motor car we should "subordinate the private automobile to the development of general public transportation systems"; instead of imposing professionally designed end products we should work with others since "citizen participation in the building process should be considered as a basic right." Time will tell if the Warsaw Declaration has a significant effect on the future practice of urban design.

#### NOTES

- 1 The author would like to thank the British Council and London University's Hayter Travel Award Committee who made the trip financially possible and the Polish architects and planners who helped to interpret the city. Danuta Jachniak kindly helped to update the information to mid-1983. Parts of the article appeared in "Warsaw Impressions '81" *Urban Design Quarterly* (August/September 1981), pp. 3-6, published by the British Urban Design Group. The Group was established in 1978 to promote high standards of performance and interprofessional cooperation in planning, urban design, architecture, and landscape design in Great Britain, and to educate the relevant professions and the public in matters relating to urban design. Further information on the Group may be obtained from Francis Tibbalds, 39 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0AW, United Kingdom.
- 2 For a more complete account of Poland's housing policy and design see Marmot, Alexi F. "Polish Housing" *Housing Review* 30, no. 6 (November-December 1981): 180-182.

# The Warsaw Charter

Printed by Solidarity  
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## 1. Architecture and politics

The conflict of forces shaping the human environment is a natural process. The responsibility of the architect for the problems of environmental pollution, the model of industrialization, or the housing question make sense, however, only in the socio-political sphere. The International Pact of Human Rights must be a fundamental guidepost for resolution of the emerging dilemmas. As citizens we have to defend these rights and demand that Governments fulfill their undersigned obligations. The reference of all environmental conditions directly to architecture is purely declarative and blurs the actual professional responsibility—architects are fully responsible for the shape and consequences of their designs in the sphere of culture.

## 2. Between collectivism and individualism

It is necessary to bring back the features of personalism to human contacts which today are split between the extremes of collectivism and individualism. Its basis is the personal treatment of a human being, as well as the creation of communities respecting private and authentic social property. Nationalization in the name of struggle with chaos, harmonization by increasing homogeneous structures and ordering by the repetition of forms is absurd from the viewpoint of personalism.

The development of space favours social life only when it is combined

with the ownership of territory and self-governing communities based on personal ties and forming intermediary institutions between the family and state.

## 3. Responsibility for the crisis of architecture

The main feature of XXth century architecture—totalism—is the result not only of socio-political systems. The uncritical belief in progress, mythologizing of science and technology, magic of big numbers connected with demographic growth, identification of pluralism with chaos have brought forth the conviction that man by himself does not know how to dwell and live, and that it is only the architect who can design one's living. The ideas of standardization and prefabrication on a utopian scale and not according to real needs have not been imposed upon the architects. Neither have they been coerced to isolate pollutions instead of neutralization of their sources, nor to neglect the law of value in urban planning. Moreover, nobody forced them to submit life to spatial systems which divide and segregate an integral whole. Architects are responsible for the present state of the relationship Man—Architecture—Environment to the extent in which they have undertaken to accomplish these ideas.

## 4. Continuity in architecture

The greatest mistake of the architecture born of the spirit of the Athens Charter was the breakdown of the continuity of

culture. We cannot forget that the destruction of the traditional city was carried out in the name of lofty ideals: the right of man to a radiant life, sun and contact with nature. The heritage of the past was reduced to a Skansen museum. The architect of our century opposed ideology to life, and designs to reality. Instead of practicing the profession in an ever more complicated manner and increasingly remote from reality, it is necessary to restore continuity of architecture by bringing back concepts of the architect's trade such as style, modus and canon.

## 5. Urban planning

The thesis about the necessity of dispersal of buildings as a remedy against the inhuman concentration of the XIXth century cities has led to the transition from one extreme to the other. The extensive development of cities made possible by the motor-car led to the disintegration of the traditional urban space, wastage of terrain and deterioration of the energy balance. Concentration is a generator of social life in the city. There is a threshold of building intensity below which the development of technical and social infrastructure and mass transport becomes impossible. The development of cities faces the choice: a concentrated system with decentralized workplaces and services, or a dispersed system whose centre is choking with the influx of the population from districts forming a housing monoculture. The concept of the

city as a hierarchical system of autonomous structural units, neighbourhood units or social settlements is an unsuccessful compromise combining the faults of village and town but deprived of their advantages. The essence of wise planning should be anticipation and stimulation of desirable phenomena instead of wishful thinking; decreeing life by the imperatives of plans. Urban planning must release forces imparting dynamism to the natural development of the city and to limit its adverse effects by the prohibitions of law.

#### 6. Monumental architecture and urban tissue

In the name of aesthetic uniformity the architect cannot deprive individuals and communities of the right to express one's own personality, as well as the right to spontaneous actions and free choice. The totalitarianism of XXth century architecture has sterilized both monumental architecture—sacrum of the city—and the urban tissue—its profanum. The division into private and public space has become diffused. The fascist style and social realism have changed into pure decoration of the regime buildings such as Palaces of Culture. Both the causes of the chaos and the monotony of architecture should be sought for in social life, and not in aesthetics. The city is simultaneously a composition and a collage. The concepts of monumentalism and urban tissue exist only due to the

contrast. A human settlement is not any concentration of dwelling houses but only that in which social life finds expression in the buildings that serve it.

#### 7. Architecture is an art

The conception of architecture as a science and technology deprives it of its culture-forming and myth-forming role. A discriminant of architecture relative to building is the degree of aesthetic sublimation. Aesthetic functions are the reason of existence of architecture and simultaneously fulfilment of the social role of the architect. The purpose of practising architecture is not to create new concepts but to give continually new interpretations to the age-long phenomena of house and city. In a democratic society there can be no art without competing artistic endeavours. There are no dwellings, houses and cities for everybody, only architecture for everybody is an art.

#### 8. The language of architecture

The architect is neither an omnipotent creator nor a slave of universal or local spatial-cultural patterns. The proper role of the architect is to interpret them within the framework of civilizational continuum. The reduction of architecture to a purely utilitarian function deprives it of its role of social mediator. The moment when the new-speak of blocks, settlements and pavilions substituted the language of patterns, the city became illegible,

monotonous and dead for its inhabitants. The city can be built only on the basis of the elementary patterns of interiors, houses, streets and squares.

#### 9. The social role of the architect

An architect does not have to build at any cost; it is better to be silent than to lie, giving consent to the degradation of his art under the pressure of casual fulfilling of needs. For the same price one may have or have not architecture. This is not a question of affluence but of the social situation of the profession and broadly conceived culture, wherein the architect is even not always indispensable.

The practising of architecture as a social service requires, however, limitation of the state monopoly in building, reasonable competition in the profession, possibility of the choice of a client and architect, briefly the status of a free and creative profession.

#### 10. Memento

We proclaim this Charter in Warsaw, a city destroyed not only by war, but later also by the meeting of a contemporary urban doctrine with a totalitarian sociopolitical one.

The solidarity in face of totalitarian danger both to the nation and individual reminds us today that architecture can be human and beautiful only when it is created by free citizens serving a free society.