

Between Modernism and Socialist Realism – the Case of Nowa Huta (1949-1956)¹

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Introduction

It is worth facing the recurring question about the relationship between modernism and socialist realism in Polish architecture from 1949 to 1956. However, this multilayered and complex problem requires extended studies. We tackle a number of complex issues here. One of them is the problem of the complexity of modernism which is viewed in different ways from the perspectives of literary, science, philosophy and aesthetics. Another issue is the inner inconsistency of socialist realism. The ambiguity of the architecture of the socialist realism period that lasted for a short time in Poland is nowadays expressed by, among others, the term “between” used in Polish academic literature – between tradition and modernity, between utopia and implementation, between the national and historical form. On the one hand, we are dealing with recognizable space which we can easily identify as socialist realist (due to, among others, specifically simplified, “overdone” detail). On the other hand, it is space that cannot be simply classified. It is impossible not to notice that this visually rich world created through historical stylization was subordinated to a specific political program. Sometimes, however, this complex tool of political influence takes on a form which is closer to the interwar tradition (with which it is connected thanks to the artists, among others) than to the Soviet tradition. So, is it socialist realism or modernism? Maybe we should accept the fact that at a given moment in time a lot of systems coexist and overlap in works of art.² It must also be remembered that the spaces of socialist realism were perceived and interpreted by individuals, not by masses, as well as that they were individually designed.

1. Socialist realism, soc-realism, modernism? An overview of issues.

It is worth recalling that the complex relationship between modernism and socialist realism took on special significance in post-war Poland. The strong opposition between socialist realism and modernism deeply rooted in Poland at that time was the effect of propaganda efforts. Between 1949 and 1956, in official discourse, the polarization

of (bad) modernism identified with the old order and (good) socialist realism creating the New Order and the New Man took place³. Modernism was officially condemned during the conference of architects of the Polish United Workers' Party (1949) and considered to be a style hostile to the system⁴. At that time, there was a shift towards broadly conceived, so-called national historicizing architecture, which in Poland was most often classical and Renaissance architecture. The aim of this shift was, to a large extent, to visually unify the states dependent on the Soviet Union whose architectural landscape was to be clearly different from that characteristic for the western world.

3. The problem of creating a new type of man was one of the most important postulates of totalitarianism, and, more narrowly, of the communist ideology. Compare Fritzsche Peter, Hellbeck Jochen, *The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany*, [in:] *Beyond Totalitarianism. Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. Meyer Michael, Fitzpatrick Sheila, Cambridge 1992.

4. Goldzamt Edmund, *Zagadnienie realizmu socjalistycznego w architekturze (The issue of socialist realism in architecture)*, [in:] *O polską architekturę socjalistyczną. Materiały z Krajowej Partyjnej Narady Architektów odbytej w dniu 20-21.VI.1949 roku w Warszawie (For Polish socialist architecture. Materials from the National Party Conference of Architects of 20th – 21th June 1949 in Warsaw)*, ed. Minorski Jan, Warsaw, 1950, pp. 17-47.

1. Nowa Huta, the staircase in the Administrative Building. Photo by W. Kamiński



1. The text is a shortened version of an article published in the book *Modernizm w Europie, modernizm w Gdyni. Architektura XX wieku do końca lat sześćdziesiątych i jej ochrona w Gdyni i Europie (Modernism in Europe, modernism in Gdynia. Architecture of the 20th century until the end of the 1960s and its conservation in Gdynia and Europe)*, ed. Sołtysik Maria, Hirsch Robert, Gdynia 2013, pp. 85-92.

2. Compare Ranciere Jacques, *Estetyka jako polityka (Aesthetics as politics)* Warsaw 2007; Winkowski Piotr, *Architektura polska lat 50. – idee zbiorowe i indywidualne (Polish architecture of the 1950s – collective and individual ideas)* [in:] *Futuryzm miast przemysłowych. 100 lat Wolfsburga i Nowej Huty (The futurism of industrial cities. 100 years of Wolfsburg and Nowa Huta)*, ed. Kaltwasser Martin, Majewska Ewa, Szreder Kuba, Kraków 2007, p. 238.



2. "National forms", Renaissance attic of the Administrative Building. Photo by W. Kamiński

After the period between 1953 and 1957, the strong opposition between socialist realism and modernism was maintained, but now the two styles took on a different meaning. Modernism became the symbol of freedom, (licensed) modernity and liberation, whereas socialist realism began to be associated with underdevelopment and the evil of the Stalin era, which was deemed to be a period of mistakes and perversions⁵.

I suggest studying this phenomenon using the example of the largest socialist industrial city in Central Europe. In Nowa Huta it is possible to notice both a clear thread of the continuation of the post-war period trends, as well as of ideological and real "socialist realist implementation" or ideologization of the architectural narration.

2. Nowa Huta. The icon or failure of socialist realism?

The history of Nowa Huta begins after World War II and becomes an integral part of the history of Polish architecture, as the city undergoes the same, though intensified, processes which take place in the whole of Poland and, more broadly, in East-Central Europe. Centrally planned industrial cities were related to the postulates of fast, enforced industrialization. Like Soviet cities, they constituted monofunctional centers integrally connecting the industry with the city which was conceived as a monumental workers' housing estate. The whole complex – from its spatial arrangement to employment and social life – was

5. Ogólnopolska Narada Architektów (National Conference of Architects), Warsaw 15-17.03.1956. Kotarbiński Adam, *Nasza dotychczasowa postawa wobec realizmu (Our attitude towards realism until now)* "Architektura" ("Architecture") No. 3, 1956.

3. Nowa Huta, Central Square. Photo by W. Kamiński



subordinated to the factory, which limited other city-forming functions. However, it must be remembered that as far as the form and urban arrangements are concerned, Soviet cities created at the beginning of the 1930s to a large extent drew from the avant-garde experiences⁶.

Nowa Huta, the most important Polish socialist city and the key element of the Six-Year Plan was designed to have as many as 100,000 inhabitants, whereas Dunaujvaros⁷ and Eisenhüttenstadt⁸ could provide space for "only" 60,000 people. Unlike the two other complexes mentioned, Nowa Huta was differently located, in close proximity to a large metropolis – Kraków⁹.

The design and investment process, which was quickly carried out and improvised¹⁰, resulted in many, often formally approved deviations from the principles of socialist realism. Despite the design problems, the basic urban framework based on the radial city layout was implemented¹¹. Only the representative central zone housing the Community Centre and the Town Hall was not created. It is because the reasoning behind the development of the city was mainly pragmatic and not ideological. The key aim was to provide apartments and social infrastructure essential for the operation of the combined collective. Buildings such as blocks of flats, kindergartens, schools and a hospital were built first. The need to provide representative architecture was definitely less important. "Essentially, it was all about building a city, or, to be more precise, a complex of urban blocks of flats (districts), which would ensure simple reproduction of the workforce at low investment and low costs", as Polish sociologists emphasize¹².

3. Nowa Huta. Modernism vs./and socialist realism? The similarity of forms and ideas.

The part of (the old) Nowa Huta built during the period of socialist realism complied with many principles of that time related to shaping urban tissue. On the other hand, its architecture avoids schematic doctrinal directives in many respects.

The element that is definitely connected with socialist realism is, to a large extent, the imposed, historicizing urban arrangement: perimeter street development, broad alleys

6. Compare Lorek Andrzej, *Nowa Huta na tle miast socrealistycznych (Nowa Huta compared to socialist realist cities)* [in:] *Nowa Huta – architektura i twórcy miasta idealnego. Niezrealizowane projekty (Nowa Huta – the architecture and creators of an ideal city. Unrealized projects)*, ed. Sibilla Leszek, Kraków 2007, pp. 8-9.

7. Compare Barka Gabor, Fehervari Zoltan, Prakfalvi Andre, *Dunaújvárosi építészeti Kalauz: 1950-1960*, Budapest 2007.

8. Karg Detlef, *Nachkriegserbe – Denkmalpflege in Eisenhüttenstadt*, [in:] *Zabytki drugiej połowy XX wieku - waloryzacja, ochrona, konserwacja (Monuments of the second half of the 20th century – valorization, conservation, and maintenance)*, ed. Szymgin Bogusław, Haspel Jörg, Warsaw-Berlin 2010.

9. Compare Purchla Jacek, *Miasto niepokorne, znaczenie lat 1946-1956 dla rozwoju Krakowa (A non-submissive city, the significance of the years 1946-1956 for the development of Kraków)* [in:] *Kraków-Małopolska w Europie Środka. Studia ku czci prof. Jana M. Małeckiego w 70 rocznicę urodzin (Kraków – Małopolska region in Central Europe. Studies in honour of Professor Jan M. Małecki on the 70th anniversary of his birthday)* Kraków 1996, idem, *Nowa Huta jako problem badawczy (Nowa Huta as a research problem)* [in:] *Narodziny Nowej Huty. Materiały sesji naukowej odbytej 25 kwietnia 1998 roku (The birth of Nowa Huta. Materials from an academic session of 25th April 1998)* ed. J. Małecki, Kraków 1999.

10. This is pointed out by, among others, S. Juchnowicz. Compare: Juchnowicz Stanisław, *Nowa Huta – z doświadczeń warsztatu projektowego (Nowa Huta – from the experiences of a design workshop)* [in:] *Nowa Huta – przeszłość i wizja. Studium muzeum rozproszonego (Nowa Huta – the past and a vision. A study of the dispersed museum)*, Kraków 2008, p. 26.

11. Komorowski Waldemar, *Wartości kulturowe Nowej Huty. Urbanistyka i architektura (The cultural values of Nowa Huta. Urban planning and architecture)* [in:] *Nowa Huta – the past and the vision. A study of the dispersed museum*, Kraków 2008, p. 106.

12. Jałowicki Bohdan, Szczepański Marek, *Miasto i przestrzeń w perspektywie socjologicznej (City and space in the sociological perspective)*, Warsaw 2002, p. 179. The problem of biopolitics and reproduction is one of the most important aspects of the doctrine. Compare Hoffman David, Tamm Annette, *Utopian biopolitics. Reproductive policies, gender roles, and sexuality in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union*, [in:] *Beyond Totalitarianism. Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. Meyer Michael, Fitzpatrick Sheila, Cambridge 1992.

perfectly suited for rallies and demonstrations, squares and a strongly emphasized centre. When it comes to links with socialist realism in architecture, there are overscaled forms (although they can only be found in the central zone) clearly pertaining to the concept of “nationality” which was postulated at that time. Most stylistic references were drawn from the Renaissance. However, in principle, only representative public utility buildings, such as the administrative building of the ironworks (and less often residential buildings) are decorated with details¹³.

Doctrinal socialist realism in Nowa Huta is connected not as much with architecture or urban planning, as with a politicized mechanism for creating and controlling space, and with central planning resulting in a lack of developmental continuity. Therefore, we can talk about an imposed, politically conditioned location of the city, an imposed functional program, and also an imposed spatial arrangement. In the case of Nowa Huta we can also talk about comprehensive, total thinking about a project or “great architectural narration” aiming to arbitrarily arrange urban space aspiring to influence the life of a collective.

The postulate of shaping a human being with the use of art and architecture – a holistic artistic plan – has a modernist, avant-garde origin¹⁴. Functionalism and socialist ideology were merged here, although for a different purpose¹⁵. It must be remembered, however, that the analogy between the slogans is rather superficial, at least in official discourse. The motivation behind the creation of the new order reflected in the new spatial arrangement during the period of socialist realism was different. The slogans used by artists and architects in the 1920s meant something completely different than after World War II (in Central Europe) when they were modified, ideologized and implemented by civil

13. However, in accordance with the postulates of the doctrine, the details were “overworked” and synthesized, often for pragmatic, economical reasons. The problem of the national form is a separate issue, though.

14. However, the problem is more complex. Researchers definitely cannot agree on how to connect and interpret the similarity of the avant-garde and socialist realist ideologies. B. Groys is in favour of the continuation of tradition, compare Groys Boris, *Stalin jako totalne dzieło sztuki (Stalin as a total work of art)*, Warsaw 2008, whereas S. Buck-Morss argues that such a comparison is wrong, compare Buck-Morss Susan, *Dreamworld and catastrophe: the passing of mass utopia in the East and West*, London 2000. Vladimir Paperny also returns to these issues. *Architecture in the age of Stalin*, Cambridge 2002.

15. Paszkowski Zbigniew, *Miasto idealne w perspektywie europejskiej i jego związki z urbanistyką współczesną (The ideal city in a European perspective and its connections with modern urban planning)* Kraków 2011, p. 107.



4. Nowa Huta, Roses Avenue, representative axis. Photo by A. Sumorok

servants or decision-makers representing the Party.

Therefore, it is worth considering whether in the case of Nowa Huta we can talk about “soul engineering” or rather decorating the authority itself. And maybe it was simply all about creating a good and (under the given circumstances) the only possible residential environment?

In the case of Nowa Huta we mainly deal with an enormous residential complex and here perhaps we can find most formal analogies to modernism – the social housing estate, the neighborhood unit or the garden housing estate. It is worth emphasizing once again that even model industrial cities such as Magnitogorsk had strong origins in functionalism, and the beginning of their development was connected with representatives of the avant-garde (May, Milutkin). Despite a change of the architectural form, the essential features of the arrangement remained the same: the separation of functions, development of residential blocks of flats, rational communication or emphasis on creating green areas¹⁶.

Each of the residential housing estates in Nowa Huta consists of 3 – 4 blocks of flats, designed for 5,000 – 6,000 inhabitants, equipped with well-developed social infrastructure: schools, crèches, shops and public, common spaces. Stanisław Juchnowicz writes (contemporarily):

16. Jajeśniak-Quast Dagmara, *In the shadow of the factory: steel towns in postwar Eastern Europe*, [in:] *Urban machinery: inside modern European cities*, ed. Misa Thomas, MIT Press, 2008, pp. 181-188.

5. Eisenhuttenstadt. Photo by W. Kamiński





6. Nowa Huta, housing district. Photo by W. Kamiński

"The social concept of Nowa Huta is based on the Anglo-Saxon idea of a 'neighborhood unit' grouping a defined number of inhabitants around the elements of a social bond. A hierarchical system of social centers is connected with this concept"¹⁷. Indeed, a lot of analogies to Perry's concept can be found in the complexes of Nowa Huta – for example in B housing estates (e.g. the fact that streets had different width and a hierarchical meaning, the structural connection with a larger, central social centre, the great role of green areas). In Nowa Huta, greenery was always used as an element of a housing estate arrangement – it served to create inner backyards and to provide a visual connection between individual estates.

However, distinguishing the centre of an arrangement, emphasizing the axis and dominants, clearly emphasizing the borders of housing estates and attributing great significance to greenery surrounding blocks of flats are features characteristic for many less avant-garde housing estate complexes built in the 1920s¹⁸.

17. Juchnowicz Stanisław, *Nowa Huta – z doświadczeń warsztatu projektowego (Nowa Huta – from the experiences of a design workshop)*, [in:] *Nowa Huta – architektura i twórcy miasta idealnego. Niezrealizowane projekty (Nowa Huta – the architecture and creators of an ideal city. Unrealized projects)*, ed. Sibila Leszek, Kraków 2007, p. 29.

18. These features are mentioned by Wanda Kononowicz with reference to the development of Wrocław garden estates in the 1920s, such as Sępólno, Popowice, Grabiszyn. Compare Kononowicz Wanda, *Oblicza modernizmu w urbanistyce europejskiej pierwszego trzydziestolecia XX wieku na przykładzie Wrocławia (The faces of modernism in European urban planning of the first thirty years of the 20th century as exemplified by Wrocław)* [in:] *Modernizm w Europie, modernizm w Gdyni. Architektura lat międzywojennych i jej ochrona (Modernism in Europe, modernism in Gdynia. Architecture of the interwar years and its conservation)* Gdynia 2009, pp. 18-19.

The fundamental difference between a modernist, social and socialist realist (but in its totalitarian, Soviet form) housing estate was noticed as early as in the 1940s by Barbara Brukalska and related to the aspect of enforcement. Brukalska emphasized that social and cultural needs must be fulfilled voluntarily and cannot be enforced, while "the directive of totalitarian systems includes a postulate according to which both public and private life of inhabitants must be managed and supervised by special educational institutions and authorities within the framework of the ideology of the doctrine in force"¹⁹.

The problem of creators.

Socialist realism designed by modernists?

It seems that significant influence on the form of the city – both socialist realist and modernist (or socialist-modernist, because such a term can also be found in the literature of the subject, due to a lack of uniform terminology) – was exerted by designers themselves, although their role in this process of "political" design is traditionally lessened (which simplifies the problem to a small extent).

Socialist realism is an imposed doctrine indeed, although it is implemented not by politicians, but by architects who comply with pressures to a larger a smaller extent, and have different tastes when it comes to using traditional forms²⁰.

On the one hand, Nowa Huta constituted a counter-proposal to pre-war spatial thinking, especially in its functionalistic form, which was identified with a threat by many people after 1945. On the other hand, the city had many features in common with it. Simplifying it to a large extent, we can talk about the development of a garden city, a social housing estate, keeping its traditional look referring to 19th-century arrangements. A hybrid creation? While attempting to evaluate it, we cannot forget that a city is space consisting of different layers that are created in time and of various permeating ideas.

19. Brukalska Barbara, *Zasady społecznego projektowania osiedli mieszkaniowych (Principles of social design of housing estates)*, Warsaw 1948, p. 22.

20. The organization of the "Miastoprojekt" (Cityproject) itself, as well as the creators of Nowa Huta are described by, among others, L. Sibila. Compare Sibila Leszek, *Nowa Huta – architektura i twórcy "miasta idealnego" (Nowa Huta – architecture and creators of an "ideal city")* [in:] *Nowa Huta – architektura i twórcy miasta idealnego. Niezrealizowane projekty. (Nowa Huta – the architecture and creators of an ideal city. Unrealized projects)*, curator of the exhibition – L. Sibila, Kraków 2007.