

Rewriting the Past: The Demolition of Modern Buildings and Monuments in Post-Communist Poland

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*„Burząc pomniki, oszczędzajcie cokoly. Zawsze mogą się przydać.”
("When you destroy monuments, spare the pedestals.
One can always find a use for them.")
Stanisław Jerzy Lec, a Polish poet.*

Human beings undergo continuous changes. So does their environment, which becomes the immediate testimony to the turns in human perception of life and to the shifts in ideologies. The problem of permanence and change in architecture and in urbanism exposes the complexity of urban transformation processes, especially with regard to the contemporary city. Thus, throughout history, distinct temporalities co-exist, composed of the overlapping layers of remains from various periods, of moments of rupture and redefinition of paradigms. However, it seems to be a common process that the present is constructed while reducing or erasing what brings to mind or celebrates the immediately preceding period. The search for modernity and development plays a constant role in the redefinition of existing symbols, monuments and parts of cities in the contemporary urban context. It seems a worldwide phenomenon, yet our special interest lies with the case of post-communist Poland.

Therefore, this paper will analyse the current situation of the Monument of the Revolutionary Struggle, also known as the Monument of the Revolutionary Deed, in Rzeszów,¹ Poland, showing the dissonance at stake. On the one hand, it is a witness to communist years, reminding a large number of people about the period of suffering they wish to erase from their memory. On the other hand, it is a testimony to Polish history, part of the collective memory of the citizens of Rzeszów, and heritage for future generations - a link between past and future.

THE BIRTH OF THE MONUMENT

The Monument of Revolutionary Struggle was unveiled in Rzeszów on the 1 May, 1974, the day of May Day marches and rallies, an important event of compulsory attendance at the time. It occupies a central and representative space in the city, next to the Provincial Council (built in the socialist realist style), the Friars Minor convent, shopping centres and, until recently, to the Hotel Rzeszów.

When the idea of building the Monument was proposed, the group of visual artists and architects in Rzeszów held a competition, which was won by the sculptor Marian Konieczny,² the ex-vice-chancellor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow and the author of many well-known statues.³ Work on the project started in 1967.⁴

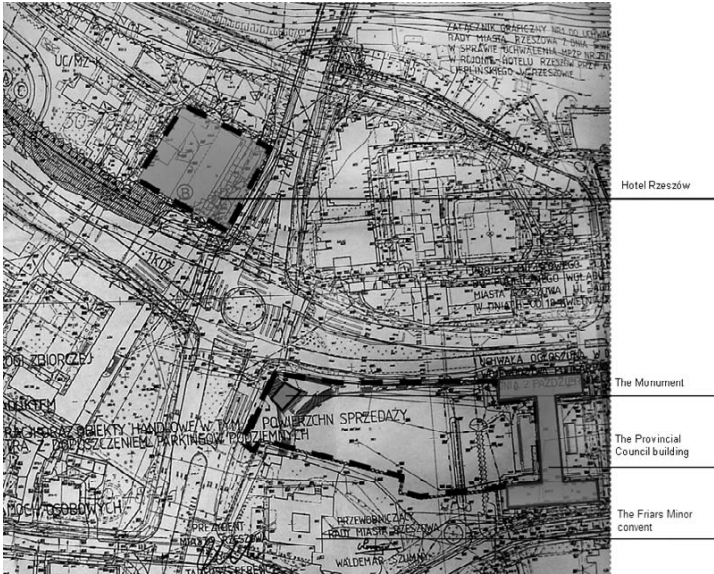


Figure 1. A detailed map showing the monument's location.
 Photograph: authors.

Despite the fact that it has been just a few years since the City Council decided to install the city emblem on the Monument, it now faces a critical moment - either of being considered part of Polish cultural heritage and being safeguarded, or of being abandoned to an unpromising fate.

As defended by Ashworth, heritage is a cultural construction conveying intangible meanings and is potentially dissonant to some extent, as it has to deal with different individual expectations, and public and private interests. Therefore, if heritage is a construction and a potent instrument of ideology, the significant questions are why it was created, and by whom.⁵ In the case of the Rzeszów's Monument, it is evident that political, economic and legitimating issues play a fundamental role in determining its future.

The conjectures about its origin are contradictory and ideologically constructed from the present to defend either its preservation or destruction.⁶ Wiktoria Helwin,⁷ for instance, maintains the idea that it was meant to be a symbol of the commemoration of 1000 years of the Polish nation, erected by a grass-roots impulse, and hence disconnected from the glorification of communism. It should represent the turbulent times of the region throughout last hundreds of years, including references to the regional leader of a guerrilla group of the National Military Organization, one of the Polish resistance movements in World War II, as well as to soldiers who defended Polish territory even after the war. She also states that the secretary of the Party became its patron merely because such events required the Party's consent. Although it was convenient to accept the name – *of the Revolutionary Struggle* – in order to see it built, it was possible to 'smuggle' in the idea of the Polish national millennium and preserve this particular significance until today.

Nevertheless, due to its name and the period it was built, many perceive the Monument as a product of the communist system, associated with the time of suffering, deprivation and repression, and therefore, as an unwanted object. Consequently, this assumed origin of the Monument is one of the arguments of those in favour of its destruction, who maintain that it represents a past whose memory should not be preserved, and that it is an anachronistic symbol of the city. Obviously, economic interests and political issues are also present in the debates on the future fate of the Monument, as well as the land use and the search for a new contemporary identity.

The Monument's fragility and the uncertainty of its future may be further evidenced by the widespread and ready demolition of buildings and monuments from the communist period taking place in Poland, the lack of a preservation policy, and the private ownership of the land on which the Monument is placed. It is remarkable how the political changes due to the transition to capitalism, which started in 1989 and which has been well consolidated by Polish entry into the European Union, among other things, resulted in a will to break with the recent past and to construct a new contemporary identity. The neglect of the preservation of Modern buildings and monuments from the communist period, and their destruction, are part of this ideological rupture and pursuit of a new identity and modernity.

THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN POLAND, THE MONUMENT AND THE HOTEL RZESZÓW

The Monument was simultaneously built with another Modern landmark of Rzeszów, the Hotel Rzeszów, designed by the Modern architect Tadeusz Łobos in 1966, just one year before the Monument. It opened to the public in 1972 and together with the Monument they formed a well-matched duo. In 2007 the Hotel was demolished and the coherence of the ensemble was destroyed with it. Currently, there is debate about the ownership of the land, between the city and ex-proprietors in relation to the planning of a large scale commercial complex.



Figure 2. The monument against a background of the Provincial Council building.
Photograph: authors.

Apart from its importance as a city hotel, the demolished Hotel Rzeszów and the Monument of the Revolutionary Struggle were the two most important landmarks of Rzeszów. They are also among the most significant examples of the adoption of Modern Movement ideas in the city after the decay of the socialist realism of the previous decade.

The debates on Modern architecture in Poland have their origin in the interwar period, when the avant-garde journal *Blok* was published, in 1924, and which included the works of artists and architects grouped around it, such as Henryk Berlewski, Henryk Stażewski and Szymon Syrkus. The spread of Modern art and architecture opposed the then current eclectic trends focused on research into the national character of Polish art and architecture after independence was regained in 1918.⁸ This was a period when the so-called national styles in architecture were much in the ascendant and aimed to play an active role in the construction of modern Poland, mixing a wide

range of eclectic references. The new trends of artistic and architectural thinking confronted these academic revivals and looked instead to the search for renewal by the international avant-garde, the German functionalists and Le Corbusier. It is worthwhile to stress the importance of the works of Syrkus, Lech Niemojewski, Barbara and Stanisław Brukalski and their participation in the first CIAM meetings. Their contact with the international Modern Movement exponents led to a fruitful exchange of ideas and strengthened local debate.

Curiously enough, according to Leśnikowski,⁹ the development of Modern Polish architecture was not affected by the reaction it faced in countries like Germany and the Soviet Union during the second half of the 1930s, as can be seen in several works from before World War II.

Architecture and town planning of the immediate post-war period had to deal with the devastation of the cities and the catastrophic economic situation of the country. Although reconstruction was the main task, new undertakings were started too, particularly during the first half of the 1950s. The recovery of neoclassical references proposed by socialist realism was realised in the design of several buildings in Poland, mainly public. The exploration of modern materials, techniques and forms – as proposed by the Modern Movement – was seen as a way of creating a new architecture both distant from the socialist realism return to the classicism and linked to the earlier functionalism of the 1920s. The works of Tadeusz Łobos, Oskar and Zofia Hansen,¹⁰ and Jerzy Soltan, among others, are of fundamental importance for understanding the post-war Modern Polish architecture and its derivations.

The Hotel Rzeszów and the Monument thus responded to this new trend in the post-war period, in which late Modernist influence was being developed and socialist realism weakened. It is against this background that we have to understand the two projects. They represent the most significant examples of the search for Modernity in the fields of architecture and related arts in Rzeszów.

With regard to the Monument, it owes an important part of its striking visual impact to the com-



Figure 3. Winter view of the monument's surrounding out of the Provincial Council building.
Photograph: authors.

combination of a simple and impressive form with the force of raw concrete. Its base is composed of reinforced concrete stilts, which support 37 pairs of symmetrical segments, arranged in the shape of laurel leaves. It combines the exploration of form with well-thought-out design work and technical solutions, presenting *beton brut* as one of its most important features – which Le Corbusier had formerly explored in Ronchamp, La Tourette and Chandigarh and which was one of the main elements of British New Brutalism up to the 1970s. The abstract image of the two concrete, interconnected columns rises up as a unitary element in the urban landscape.



Figure 4. Hotel Rzeszów.

Photograph comes from a webpage of Rzeszów Technical University, <http://www.prz.edu.pl/wzizm/index.php?page=konferencje/ruch/miejscce>.

Built on opposite sides of an intersection of important avenues, the Hotel and the Monument acted together as symbolic landmarks or, to use Kevin Lynch's terms, as elements of legibility in the mental image of the city held by its inhabitants. Giedion and Sert, in 'Nine Points on Monumentality' had formerly referred to the need to create monuments as 'human landmarks' which would 'outlive the period which generated them, and constitute a heritage for future generations,' in this way they would be 'the link between the past and the future.'

Preoccupation with the preservation of monuments as witnesses of the past developed after World War II, particularly through the Venice Charter of 1964, and the Convention Concerning Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage organized by UNESCO in 1972. Nowadays, a large network of institutions concerned with heritage conservation and management is being consolidated and numerous small-scale and lesser known objects are being safeguarded, too. In this context, the case of the Monument of the Revolutionary Struggle should be carefully analysed in the light of trans-generation transfer, as an urban landmark, as well as an artistic object with its own intrinsic interest.

THE FUTURE OF THE MONUMENT

Unlike its surrounding square, the Monument is not listed, since in Poland an order of preservation is put on monuments and buildings separately from sites.¹¹ Nor is it planned to include it on a list of monuments, as affirmed by the Regional Service for Historic Monuments Preservation in Rzeszów. It could instead be preserved as Modern cultural patrimony, but no such motion has been put forward.

On the 11 July, 2006 the Order of Friars Minor recovered their previous possession of the land where the Monument stands. The Order now has the right to prepare its own project for redevelopment of the area which, according to the Service, has already been commissioned.

During our conversation with the Father of the Order last December, he could not state if the Monument was going to be safeguarded or demolished. It would depend on the strength of its structure as well as on the budget available.

Even though neither the public administration nor its present owners seem to have any intention of re-assessing the meaning and importance of the Monument, it should certainly be preserved from demolition. For some, it is one of the last exponents representing that period of Polish history in Rzeszów. It would be meaningful to preserve an object whose presence commemorates the aura of the recent past in today's city. It is important especially now, after demolition of its ever-present

companion the Hotel, and in face of the possible construction of a complex of commercial and conference services in that area by a private developer. Furthermore, it is still part of the city's collective memory; it has grown on the citizens. Although, it does not have the same meaning for the younger generation as for the older ones, for many, including the young, it is a crucial symbol of the city.

The absence today of a strong interest and debate about the future of the Monument is an example of the duality and complexity that exist between building the future and the permanence of the past. To be protected from destruction, the Monument needs to be defended by the public. For that, it is important to improve the citizens' knowledge of it, to create a new identity, which could be done through exhibitions, publications and documentaries. It is fundamental that a preservation order be put in place as soon as possible, seeing it as either a symbol of 1000 years of Poland history or as communist heritage. It must be defended as a fundamental link between past, present and future, as an important landmark in the Rzeszów skyline and as an artistic object in itself. It is an object capable of assuming several meanings, of being polysemantic and open to several interpretations.

NOTES

- 1 Rzeszów is a city of 170,000 inhabitants. It is situated in south eastern Poland.
- 2 In 2000 he was awarded the Commander's Cross with the Star of the Order of Poland Reborn, one of the Poland's highest orders.
- 3 For example: "Nike", in Warsaw (1964); "Lenin", in Nowa Huta, Cracow (1973), now dismantled; "T. Kościuszko", in Philadelphia, USA (1979), and many others.
- 4 Due to the marshy land, it cost over 10 million złotych, which at the time might be the price of constructing a block of flats. <http://borowik.blox.pl/html/1310721,262146,21.html?297932>. Accessed on April 10, 2008. It is not clear how the funds to build it were raised. There are two contradictory explanations for it, one arguing that the donation of money was somehow obligatory by means of a tax of 1% on people's salaries, whereas the other maintains the donations were voluntary.
- 5 ASHWORTH, G. J. Heritage: definitions, delusions and dissonances. In: AMOEDA, R. et al (ed). *Heritage 2008 – World Heritage and Sustainable Development*. Barcelos: Green Lines Institute, p.3-9.
- 6 The understanding of history as a subjective appropriation of facts, an interpretative contemporary construction – as defended by authors such as Nietzsche, Foucault and Giedion – is here fully used as an instrument to create symbolic meaning and connotation.
- 7 http://www.echo.erzeszow.pl/index.php?Itemid=3&id=129&option=com_content&task=view. Accessed on April 10, 2008.
- 8 CZERNER, Olgierd. *Competing ideas in Polish architecture*. In: LESNIKOWSKI, Wojciech. (ed). *East European modernism*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, p.206.
- 9 *Idem*, p.216.
- 10 Oskar and Zofia Hansen redesigned several destroyed quarters during the 1950s and 1960s. Oskar Hansen developed by that time the concept of "Open Form" that they would apply in several other constructions.
- 11 See note no. 7.