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Palatial socialism, or (still-)socialist centrality in Warsaw¹

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There can be no city or urban reality without a centre ... there can be no sites for leisure, festivals, knowledge, oral or scriptural transmission, invention or creation without centrality.²

These words, written in 1970 by the French Marxist spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre, echo – with quite uncanny precision – a pronouncement made fourteen years earlier by Edmund Goldzamt, a leading architectural ideologue in Warsaw during the Stalinist 1950s, ‘There can be no such thing as a city without a centre. The very idea of the city incorporates within itself the fact of the existence of the primary catalyst of the urban organism: the central ensemble or arrangement.’³

It may seem far-fetched to claim an affinity between Lefebvre’s and Goldzamt’s ideas about centrality. Lefebvre’s own political anti-Stalinism is well known, as are his hostility to the aesthetics of Stalin-era Socialist Realism and his broader lack of enthusiasm for state socialist planning and architecture’s capacity to produce a ‘differential’ space.⁴ In Lefebvre’s assessment, under actually existing socialism, ‘no architectural innovation has occurred, ... no specific space has been created’.⁵

I would like to suggest, however, that there is common ground between Lefebvre’s and Goldzamt’s ideas about architecture, the city, centrality and socialism. Further, I would like to challenge Lefebvre’s judgement concerning the failure of state socialist space, by suggesting that Warsaw’s Palace of Culture – as designed, as implemented and as still functioning today – in fact constitutes an instance of a remarkably



Figure 8.1 Edmund Goldzamt with his wife, the architect Elena Guryanova, outside the Palace of Culture, late 1950s. Courtesy of Anna Guryanova.

successful, actually existing instance of Goldzamtian-Lefebvrian centrality in action.

Goldzamt's thoughts on centrality were formulated with explicit reference to the Palace of Culture, Warsaw's then brand-new Stalinist skyscraper, a 'gift' from the Soviet Union to the newly formed Polish People's Republic. Now, the Palace of Culture was consciously intended to endow Warsaw with an entirely new political morphology, focused on itself – and the surrounding 25-hectare Parade Square – as a pivot and *dominanta*.⁶ According to the totalising morpho-logic of the day – as

verbalised by Goldzamt and other Stalinist architectural ideologues – the Palace was to function as the ‘vital and territorial centre of gravity’⁷ of Warsaw, the new ‘urban epicentre’, to which the remainder of the city would be ‘harmoniously subordinated’.⁸

The Palace was suffused with transformative social, political and economic intent. On both vertical and horizontal planes, it rode roughshod over (what survived of) Warsaw’s pre-existing urban structure and aesthetic. The radical multiplicity of functions encompassed by the building – three major theatres, three cinemas, a vast ‘Palace of Youth’ complete with resplendent marbled swimming pool, a 3,000-seat Congress Hall, municipal offices, two museums, numerous libraries, research and educational institutions, and much else – *condensed* enormous numbers of people within its walls and environs, inculcating Varsovians with a profuse concentration of socialist culture. The Palace was to serve, in the words of Warsaw architect Szymon Syrkus (a lifelong communist, but a leading International Style modernist until the onset of the Stalinist period in 1949), an ‘immovable guiding star on our journey to transform old Warsaw, princely Warsaw, royal, magnates’, burghers’, capitalist Warsaw, into socialist Warsaw’.⁹

Stalinist architectural thinking, therefore, saw no unresolvable contradiction between revolutionary social content, and morphological centrality or monumentality. Echoing German expressionist architect and theorist Bruno Taut’s influential notion of the *Stadtkrone*,¹⁰ or crown of the city, Goldzamt writes that the ‘particular destiny and ideological role’ of the central ensemble ‘determine[s] the deployment in its construction of only the most monumental types of public construction and architectural form, *which crown the aesthetic unity of the city*’ (emphasis original). Furthermore, adds Goldzamt, ‘the dominating role of the central ensemble is the effect of the concentration therein of *architectural power*’ (emphasis original).¹¹

But how does Goldzamt square the egalitarian imperative behind socialist urbanism with the Stalinist elevation of the all-dominant centre? He distinguishes between, on the one hand, the levelling effect of socialist town planning and the distribution of wealth and access to dignified living conditions and, on the other, the *architectural* differentiation between centre and periphery, which the realisation of an egalitarian urban environment necessarily entails:¹²

Socialist urbanism eradicates class differences within the city, creating across all districts identical conditions for living, in terms of dwelling, work, communal services and aesthetic experiences ... But

the eradication of the social contradiction between the city centre and the suburbs does not entail the elimination of all differences in architectural solutions; nor does it entail the eradication of central ensembles, with their particular form and spatial role. To the contrary, the democratism of socialist societies ... necessitates the enormous significance of the centres of socialist cities.

In Goldzamt's account – quite jarring, I think, to the parameters of today's democratic-peripheralist political morphology – the distinction between socialist and capitalist centrality lies precisely in the fact that, on all counts, the former exceeds the latter: in scale, in intensity, and in agentic capacity. In contrast to capitalist urban cores, which are merely 'material carriers of the dominant worldview', socialist centres function as 'actual tools of ideological impact'.¹³ 'What is more,' Goldzamt continues,

their prominence in the life of socialist cities must become incomparably higher than that of the ceremonial or financial-commercial centres of feudal and capitalist cities. The foundation of the strengthening of the role of the centre in the practice of Soviet, Polish and other People's Democracies is the *transformation of the infrastructure of social ties carried out by central ensembles*.¹⁴ (Emphasis added.)

The centre of the urban organism, when possessed of the right characteristics, is able to, and should, become a powerful agent in the transformation of society, simultaneously actualising and illustrating the 'coming unity of interests in socialist society, the unity of the interests and ideals of the entire population of the socialist city'.¹⁵ The socialist centre is thus never at loggerheads with the remainder of the city.

Like Goldzamt, Lefebvre also emphasises that there is more than just one kind of centrality, and that the nature of centrality's social functioning depends on more than merely its shape, size and appearance. Having declared that 'there can be no city or urban reality without a centre', Lefebvre makes an important clarification: 'But as long as certain relationships of production and ownership remain unchanged, centrality will be subjected to those who use these relationships and benefit from them.'¹⁶ The question of the urban, then, is not one of periphery versus centre. The victory of a more collective, more egalitarian, more just or otherwise better urbanism does not depend on the

vanquishing of the middle by the margins. It is, instead, a question of progressive and regressive centralities: those owned by and open to the collective, or those held and guarded by the few, and those whose design – its aesthetic, scalar and morphological characteristics – is founded on *planned* use value, or those determined by *calculated* exchange value.

Socialist verticality

Just as there is a socialist centrality, there is also a long tradition of socialist verticality. In the Soviet incarnation, this dates back to unrealised constructivist experiments with *anti-skyscrapers* or *horizontal* skyscrapers, such as Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, Nikolai Ladovsky's Communal House and El Lissitzky's *Wolkenbügel* ('cloud-irons'), and to the early Stalinist dream of the Palace of the Soviets, which was to stand on the site of demolished (and now rebuilt) Christ the Saviour Cathedral on the banks of the River Moskva. But its most vivid realisation came in the shape of the spate of 'tall building' construction in Moscow between 1947 and 1953. Seven towers, their heights ranging from 130 to 250 metres, were built at commanding sites ringing the central core of the Soviet capital (Lev Vladimirovich Rudnev, head of the Warsaw Palace's design team, came to prominence as the architect of Moscow State University, the tallest of the Moscow towers). The perceived correlation between capitalism and architectural verticality was an issue that the designers of the Soviet high-rises and the ideologues of Stalinist Socialist Realism were very eager to address, all the more so given the extent to which Stalinist skyscraper architecture made use of stylistic and engineering solutions borrowed from inter-war boom-era American skyscrapers. An illustrative 1953 article in the Warsaw weekly *Stolica*, about high-rise construction, cites Maxim Gorky's condemnations of American skyscrapers as 'square, lacking any desire to be beautiful ... bulky ponderous buildings towering gloomily and drearily', and diagnoses 'the American skyscraper' as 'a product of highly developed capitalism, at the kernel of which lies ground rent'.¹⁷ According to the author of the *Stolica* text, the Soviet tall building constitutes the 'absolute opposite of this image ... in its entire figure one can see the will to a beauty, whose form is appropriate to its humanistic content'.¹⁸

A citation from a key tract of the time by Goldzamt, meanwhile, makes it clear that the difference between the American 'skyscraper' and

the Soviet 'tall building' has to do not merely with architectural form, but also – and especially – with the morphology of the city as a whole.

American skyscrapers reflect the chaos and internal contradictions of the capitalist economy. They pile up alongside one another in random, clumsy heaps. They grow thoughtlessly, without any consideration for function or composition. They grow without concern for the city, whose streets they transform into ravines. The tall buildings raised among the expansive squares and boulevards of the new Moscow, by contrast, form a system appropriate to the needs and structure of the city, attesting to the emotional unity of its figure and image.¹⁹

In the words of the architectural historian Alessandro De Magistris, the Soviet 'tall building' was the 'culminating element and the expression of the new urban morphology of Communism'.²⁰ It was to be the negation (by appropriation, as De Magistris points out) of its capitalist corollary. These towers were set in sprawling expanses of empty space, rather than piled onto one another; they fulfilled public or residential functions, rather than revenue-accumulating ones; their appearance was dictated not by a will-to-profit, but by a will-to-beauty; and they were to be distributed around the city not at random, but according to a higher-ordained, total plan – whose function it would be to reduce the complexity of the ravenous, random and fragmented city of capital.

Centrality after socialism

More than a quarter-century has passed since the collapse of Poland's state socialist regime in 1989, and yet the Palace of Culture continues to work much as Goldzamt and the other planners and ideologues of Stalinist urbanism intended it to. The vast majority of Warsaw's residents – 80 per cent, according to a large-scale survey I carried out in Warsaw – consider it (and the surrounding Parade Square) to constitute Warsaw's singular central or core site (*centrum*). What is more, none of the many post-1989 plans for filling the space around it with a triumphant coterie of money-making skyscrapers – whether in the form of a circular 'crown' or an asymmetrical 'forest' – have been carried out. Neither the Palace's centrality, nor its verticality, has yet been superseded in the urban morphology of the capitalist city.

Public and private discussions between architects, decision-makers and audiences dedicated to the future of Parade Square continually circulate around the issue of whether a particular architectural solution will successfully *undermine* the Palace's dominance over its surroundings, or whether it will, conversely, *underline* this dominance, surrendering (intentionally or not) to the Palace's scale, and to the symmetry and axiality emanating from it. These are precisely the issues that occupied the attention of experts grouped together in the mayor's architectural advisory councils, during meetings held in the three years leading up to the ratification of the currently binding (but, of course, unrealised) Parade Square master plan.

During the latter stages of the final round of discussions that preceded the 2010 ratification, the council chair implored the municipally employed planner-bureaucrats who had produced the Parade Square master plan to put more effort into 'designing asymmetry' and undermining the Palace's 'axiality'. The chair emphasised that all Parade Square planning work should aim to 'depart from the symbolism of crowning the Palace'. Their new master plan – which was supposed to drown out the Palace's grandeur in an asymmetrical forest of low- and high-rise buildings of varying heights, shapes and styles – was, in their view, actually still too symmetrical, too deferential to the Palace's spatial logic.

As the council chair moved towards their closing statement, the tone of their pronouncements subtly shifted. Instead of berating the authors of the municipal master plan for having been 'defeated' by the Palace's triumphant morphology, they began to concede that such a defeat may have been inevitable, whatever spatial strategies are used. It is all well and good trying, they said, and the 'elimination of symmetry in the Palace's surroundings' would, in theory, be a desirable achievement. Ultimately, however, 'in all the variants' presented so far for the council's evaluation, 'the Palace is underlined, and it has not been possible to avoid this'.

Still-socialist centrality

Against Lefebvre's dismissal of state socialism's capacity to produce differential space, I would argue that the Palace is an example of one extraordinary state socialist building, which – on Lefebvre's own terms – *did* produce a new space, *did* exert an enormous creative effect on daily life, language and space. And furthermore, I argue that this differential space not only endures today, but remains 'still-socialist' – functioning

as a non-capitalist enclave and a potential force field of revolutionary influence – despite the collapse of the political-economic system that created it.

I do not interpret the twentieth-century Palace, then, as an *ex-communist* building, which has been ‘tamed’ by capitalism. It is not a formerly tyrannical and oppressive thing, which has now been turned into nothing other than a cute and pliable mechanism for the accumulation of profit. It cannot be reduced to a commercialised object of *Ostalgie*. The Palace of Culture is a uniquely effective piece of communist architecture, spatial planning and social engineering. It is a building that functions as well as it does because the land on which it stands was expropriated from its pre-war owners and has not yet been ‘re-privatised’. It is a building that resists the ‘wild capitalist’ chaos – of property restitution, twenty-storey billboards, inner-city poverty and rampant gentrification – that surrounds it. The Palace, in other words, is not so much a ‘post-socialist’ building as a ‘still-socialist’ one – a building which – in large part thanks to the radical centrality built into it by its designers – is able to endure as an enclave of a ‘non-capitalist’ aesthetic, spatial and social world at the very core of a late capitalist city.

I want to put the Palace forward, then, as a powerful architectural embodiment of what anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee has referred to as ‘the left side of history’,²¹ but also – since its magnificent solidity makes it likely to be around well into whatever future comes along – of what Jodi Dean calls the ‘communist horizon’.²² The Palace is a building which exists at once as an anachronism, an undead survivor of a dead (or dormant) property regime, ideology and aesthetic, and as an edifice alive with subversive public spirit, whose ‘architectural power’ embodies a powerful challenge to the privatising political economy and exclusionary spatiality of the post-socialist city.

There is nothing clear or inevitable, however, about the communist horizon, which the Palace’s enduring socialist verticality allows us to glimpse. The Palace-as-non-capitalist-enclave of socialist centrality may not hold out for ever. Since the early 2000s, Warsaw has been in the grip of a violent and unregulated wave of property restitution, and many public spaces and facilities (schools, universities, kindergartens, public gardens, sports facilities), communal and social housing developments in the city – as well as human lives – have fallen victim to it.²³ Parade Square itself is slowly being chopped up and parcelled out to the descendants of pre-war owners, or – more often – to plunderous property developers, who have spent most of the last twenty years buying up land claims, more often than not for extremely low (‘non-market’, in the capitalist parlance)

prices. In order to remain socialist, then, the Palace has to remain public. The difference between progressive and reactionary centrality is, in the last instance, a question of political economy.

Notes

1. This chapter reproduces edited versions of a fragment of the following article: Michał Murawski, 'Radical centres: the political morphology of monumentality in Warsaw and Johannesburg', *Third Text* 33, no. 1 (2019) and short fragments from the Introduction and chapters 5 and 6 of my book, *The Palace Complex: A Stalinist Skyscraper, Capitalist Warsaw, and a City Transfixed* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).
2. Lefebvre, 2003 (first published in 1979), p. 79.
3. Goldzamt, 1956, p. 11. All translations are the author's own except where indicated otherwise.
4. Léger, 2012, p. 145.
5. Lefebvre, 1991, p. 55. I expand on my critique of Lefebvre in Murawski, 2018.
6. The connection between the Maussian theory of the gift and the idea of the 'total social fact' is explored in connection with skyscraper urbanism, from a contrasting point of view, in Vyjayanthi Rao's contribution to this volume. For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see chapter 2 in Murawski, 2019.
7. Goldzamt, 1956, p. 22.
8. Sigalin, 1986, vol. 3, p. 10.
9. Sigalin, 1986, vol. 2, p. 460.
10. Taut, 1919.
11. Goldzamt, 1956, p. 52.
12. Goldzamt, 1956, p. 18.
13. Goldzamt, 1956, p. 16.
14. Goldzamt, 1956, p. 18.
15. Goldzamt, 1956, p. 20.
16. Lefebvre, 2003, p. 97.
17. Kawa, 1953, p. 7.
18. Kawa, 1953, p. 7.
19. Goldzamt, 1956, pp. 329–30.
20. De Magistris and Korob'ina, 2009, p. 8.
21. Ghodsee, 2015.
22. Jodi Dean, 2012.
23. I elaborate on this non-process of property restitution and the 'infrastructural violence' which drives it in Murawski, 2018.

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