

# Cosmopolitan Architecture: 'Deviations' from Stalinist Aesthetics and the Making of Twenty-First-Century Warsaw

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## **Introduction: Warsaw's architecture and the cosmopolitan aesthetic**

In striking contrast to cities such as Odessa and Dushanbe (as discussed in chapters 3 and 8 respectively), the period of Soviet domination over Warsaw was anything but a time of demographic diversity. The Jewish community, which had comprised around thirty per cent of the city's population throughout the 1930s (Zalewska 1996), was almost entirely decimated during the Holocaust, and thousands more Jews left Warsaw during a government-led 'anti-Zionist' campaign in 1968. Brutal population exchanges between Poland, Germany and the Soviet Union in the first years after the Second World War and the regime's tendency to pursue a 'homogenising' minorities policy (see Hann 1996) ensured that socialist Warsaw remained the most 'Polish' and least cosmopolitan capital of Poland in modern times. During the last two decades, however, the marked rise in the number of Vietnamese schoolchildren, Japanese chefs and Turkish shopkeepers has had an impact on the appearance of Warsaw's streets. Many of the city's inhabitants are proud of this diversity; they treat it as evidence that Warsaw is once again becoming a worldly, cosmopolitan city. For them, Warsaw's 'cosmopolitanisation' is interpreted as the long overdue righting of historical wrongs, a sign that Warsaw is returning to its natural condition as the diverse and dynamic capital of a country positioned at the heart of Europe.

Warsaw's turbulent history has left a powerful imprint on the city's urban landscape, and its inhabitants often claim to be especially sensitive to

the role played by the physical presence (or absence) of buildings in defining the realities of the city's past, present and future.<sup>1</sup> I intend, therefore, to explore how some of Warsaw's buildings – in particular, 1950s modernist ones – are said to have expressed the city's re-emerging cosmopolitanisation amid Soviet-style homogeneity. During fieldwork conducted in Warsaw, I participated in the everyday lives of people whose professional and private interests are more or less devoted to thinking about and creating Warsaw's architecture: historians, journalists, artists, architects, amateur enthusiasts as well as property developers. Among many of my informants, I observed a remarkably coherent tendency to celebrate the role of an architectural 'resistance movement', said to have emerged in response to Stalinist cultural policy during the 1950s. I hope to show how the heritage of this architecture of resistance is being used to cultivate a 'cosmopolitan aesthetic' linked to specific notions of good taste and locality, which relegates large chunks of Warsaw's post-war built environment to the status of historical aberrations.

For many contemporary observers, the continuity of Warsaw's historical development was stymied by enforced homogenisation and isolation during the half-century between the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 and the fall of the People's Republic (PRL – *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* in Polish) in 1989. With the possible exception of the German occupation (1939–1945), the events of the years between 1949 and 1956 – the high point of Stalinism in post-war Poland – are considered to have done the most to divert Warsaw from its 'natural' historical trajectory. In Poland, as in other countries of the Soviet bloc, Stalinism found its aesthetic expression in socialist realism, established in the Soviet Union as the 'official' method in the arts during the 1930s, and exported to Eastern Europe after 1945. In urban architecture, this entailed an emphasis on monumental forms intended to transform the appearance and existing fabric of pre-socialist cities. This future-oriented, transformative social mission was something that Stalinist architecture had in common with politically radical manifestations of the stylistically abstract and anti-ornamental modernism popular in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Europe and beyond since the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> In opposition to the modernists, however, socialist realist architects borrowed heavily from historical styles, while simultaneously claiming to anchor their designs in locally-specific traditions. In the language of its ideologues, the task of socialist realist architecture was to create a built environment that was to be 'socialist in content' but 'national in form'. As modernism in architecture was associated with self-conscious internationalism and hostility to tradition, architects adhering to modernist principles were routinely condemned for their 'rootlessness' and so-called 'cosmopolitan deviations' from the Stalinist incarnation of the socialist project.

In post-socialist Warsaw, and especially during the last several years, the buildings which the Stalinists condemned as cosmopolitan deviations have become the focus of increasingly widespread interest. Warsaw's 1950s modernist architecture is celebrated for having resisted the dictates of socialist realism, and is lauded as evidence of Polish architecture's natural embeddedness in international (or Western) architectural trends, unshaken even in the face of imposed 'totalitarian' (or Eastern)<sup>3</sup>, aesthetic-political doctrines. Further, these architectural bastions of modernity and worldliness are being enlisted in attempts to construct a heritage for the new, cosmopolitan Warsaw, to prove that this is the kind of city it always was at the core.

In fact, today's popularisers of Warsaw's cosmopolitan aesthetic sometimes betray a striking tendency to replicate the language of their historical villains, the socialist realist theoreticians who persecuted Stalin-era modernist 'rebels.' In his account of the symmetry between 1950s aesthetic debates in the two Germanys, Greg Castillo shows how the propagandists of Soviet socialist realism in the East, and of Marshall Plan modernism in the West, relied on 'looking glass inversions' (Castillo 2008: 758) of each others' arguments. In both instances, fear of 'barbarian invasion' and calls to 'cultural resistance' were deployed as weapons in an ideological conflict to determine which side would emerge as the true guardian of Europe's cultural heritage. Despite no longer having the geopolitics of the Cold War to sustain it, this kind of belligerent heritage-making seems to be alive and well in post-socialist Warsaw. As a student of the history of architecture told me on hearing the phrase 'cosmopolitan deviation,' 'it was not cosmopolitanism which was the deviation, it was socialist realism,' further referring to socialist realism as 'obscene' and 'aberrant.'

Consequently, I argue that this 'cosmopolitan' modernist material heritage, formerly condemned as deviant, is today a key component in a strategy of 'normalisation',<sup>4</sup> which pathologises in turn the core material legacy of the PRL, most vividly identified with the 'repressive' socialist realism of the 1950s. However, Warsaw's architectural antibodies are also being mobilised to resist the aesthetic threat associated with the rampant expansion of the market economy. The city's giant new office towers and gleaming shopping centres, as well as the tumbledown capitalism of its kiosks and bazaars, function as markers of Warsaw's potential descent into a new form of 'provincial' marginality – this time as an undistinguished, generic facsimile of the globalised city, laid out as a chaotic battleground for the indulgence and cowboy profiteering of the world's capitalists. In the face of this threat, many in Warsaw are keen to stress that the city should embrace a cosmopolitanism which is not merely derivative of global trends, but which emerges from within a vernacular idiom. I want to show that the

cosmopolitan Warsaw under construction sees its cosmopolitanism not as abstract and rootless but as ‘indigenous’, as emerging from within its own, historically specific contributions to the canon of world architecture.

Lastly, I hope to demonstrate that the modernist architecture of the 1950s is benefiting from its central place within an emerging order of ‘distinction.’ Following Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) insights on the capacity of aesthetic categories to legitimate and reinforce social hierarchies, I outline how the normalising ideology of Warsaw’s cosmopolitanisation also has a tendency to identify those past and present social entities it pathologises (whether human, material or abstract) with a lower station in the hierarchy of aesthetic judgement. In short, Warsaw provides a case study in the contingency and interrelatedness of two related Kantian transcendentalisms: cosmopolitanism and aesthetics. Warsaw’s architectural ‘cosmopolitan aesthetic’ is not rootless and disinterested, but grounded in locality, and inseparable from the social, economic and ideological conditions which engender it.

In addition to ethnographic material derived from conversations with my informants, I also rely on both historical and contemporary citations from Polish journalistic and scholarly sources. Although I make reference to Warsaw’s history throughout the text, my intention is not to express my own take on the past but to produce an account of the historical narrative which tends to accompany an identification with the ‘cosmopolitan’ element of Warsaw’s material heritage. Where I cite sources from the 1950s and 1960s, this is usually because they have influenced (positively or negatively) the work of present-day figures I associate with the cosmopolitan aesthetic.

### **Anti-cosmopolitanism and Stalinist socialist realism**

The years after the Second World War saw the gradual consolidation of the Soviet Union’s influence over Poland, culminating with the formal foundation of the Polish People’s Republic in July 1952. Correspondingly, it took some time before the manner of the nascent regime’s interest in the arts aligned itself consistently with the Soviet example. Between 1945 and 1951, for example, Helena and Szymon Syrkus, leading ‘avant-garde’ modernists during the interwar period, were able to design and build two housing estates (Praga I and Koło II, see Fig. 5.1a) which the contemporary architectural historian Marta Leśniakowska praises as being one of only a few examples of ‘pure’ international-style modernism in post-war Warsaw (Leśniakowska 2003: 146).



**Figure 5.1a.** From modernism to socialist realism. Koło II housing estate. Architects Helena and Szymon Syrkus, 1947–1951.



**Figure 5.1b.** From modernism to socialist realism. Palace of Culture and Science, Architect Lev Rudnev and others, 1952–1955.

However, as Poland became increasingly reliant on the stewardship of the Soviet Union, the situation in the arts came to mirror politics. At a congress of Party-affiliated architects in Warsaw on 20 and 21 June 1949, the architect Edmund Goldzamt declared socialist realism, ‘national in form, socialist in content’, but ‘drawing from the treasury of Soviet architecture’, to be the ‘mandatory creative method’ (cited in Baraniewski 2004: 104). Reciting the mantra repeated programmatically in the Soviet Union after 1946 by Stalin’s culture commissar, Andrei Zhdanov, the resolutions adopted by the congress condemned ‘formalism and cosmopolitanism in architecture’ and represented Polish architecture as a front in the struggle between two opposing camps: ‘On the one hand, the camp of democracy, socialism and peace – with the Soviet Union as its main bastion – and on the other, the camp of imperialism, economic crisis and warmongering’ (cited in Aman 1992: 59). The premises behind the new ‘method’ were given particularly clear expression in a 1950 text by Jan Minorski, a Moscow-trained Polish architect. According to Minorski:

The political foundation of valueless and formalist-constructivist architecture is a capitalist foundation. The intermediary here is cosmopolitanism. The so-called ‘value’ at the source of the penetration into our architecture of the assorted debris of bourgeois art’s downfall ... is the ideology of cosmopolitanism. Theories serving the interests of capitalism ... derive from this ideology of cosmopolitanism. ... Cosmopolitanism in art takes the form of attempts to snatch away national foundations, national pride, because people with trimmed roots are easier to push out of place and trade to the slavery of American imperialism. (Minorski 1950: 222)

The delimiting of a local aesthetic repository from which to assemble a rooted, popularly comprehensible counterpart to cosmopolitanism would therefore be a crucial aspect of the arduous path towards establishing socialist realism as the canonical style in each of the people’s democracies. Broadly speaking, for roughly six to seven years after 1949, renaissance and classical architecture came to form the bedrock of the Polish ‘national form’ and the word ‘cosmopolitanism’ remained the strongest invective in the critical vocabulary of socialist realism.<sup>5</sup>

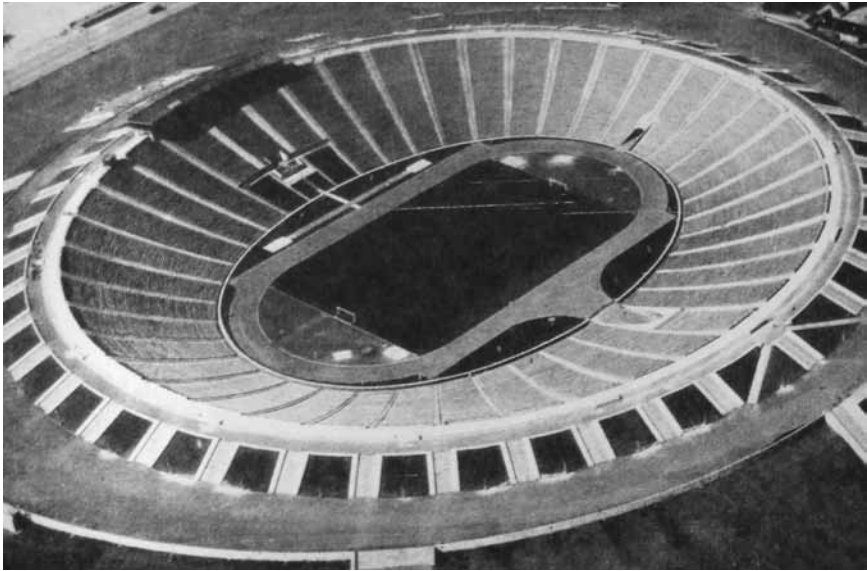
For today’s partisans of the anti-Stalinist architectural ‘resistance movement’, the very antithesis of modernist cosmopolitanism and the crowning achievement of socialist realism in its Polish edition is the Palace of Culture and Science (see Fig. 5.1b), a gargantuan 231-metre high ‘gift’ from Stalin, built between 1952 and 1955 according to a design by the Soviet architect Lev Rudnev and his team of assistants. Together with a group of Polish architects, Rudnev embarked on a widely publicised two-week tour of Po-

land, driving from one historical location to another, in order to determine which aspects of the Polish architectural heritage could most appropriately be integrated into the design for the Palace. Most notably, Rudnev and his colleagues were inspired to lavish the roofs of almost every tower, tier and wing of the Palace of Culture with elaborate versions of the rooftop crenellations ('attics') characteristic of the late Polish renaissance. A journalist writing in a 1953 edition of *Stolica* expressed his 'admiration' for the Palace, a 'monumental work' which 'represents the new architectural tendencies of socialist architecture, and, at the same time, forms an excellent connection to the best national traditions of Polish architecture' (cited in Crowley 2003: 40).

### **'Here Comes the Youth!' The Trojan horse of modernism**

Following Stalin's death in March 1953, the vigour with which the Stalinist approach to the arts was implemented had begun, cautiously, to slacken. For today's cosmopolitan aesthetes, perhaps the most frequently cited indicator of this first stage of de-Stalinisation is the opening in July 1955 of the Stadion Dziesięciolecia, the Tenth Anniversary Stadium (see Fig. 5.2a), whose name celebrates the closing of the first decade of socialist rule in Poland. The initial competition for the stadium's design was carried out in 1953. In an article on the stadium's architecture, the critic Grzegorz Piątek refers to the results of the competition as a pleasant surprise – despite the dominance of socialist realism at that time, 'all eight of the invited teams presented proposals stripped of the neo-classical pomp and overblown iconography of propaganda' (Piątek 2008: 21). The final design for the stadium produced an oval crater, sunk into the ground near the right-bank of the Vistula river, largely free of what Piątek refers to as 'socialist realist sugar coating' (2008: 22).

The building of the stadium was hastened to coincide with the opening on 31 July 1955 of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Festival of Youth and Students, a travelling culture and sports propaganda jamboree. Alongside Polish festival participants from the Union of Polish Youth (ZMP – *Związek Młodzieży Polskiej*) were 25,000 foreign visitors (Osęka 2007), many of them delegations of 'progressive youth' from 'the west', as well as representatives from the decolonising nations of Asia and Africa. According to Piątek, these foreigners were 'dressed in imaginative clothes, listened to forbidden music, and discussed degenerate art' (Piątek 2008: 23). In his account, the 'socialist games' turned out to have the effect of an 'injection of cosmopolitanism and free thinking' and became a 'beachhead for Western pop culture and arts' (Piątek 2008: 23). *To Idzie Młodość!* (Here Comes the Youth!, see Fig. 5.2b),



**Figure 5.2a.** The Trojan Horse of Modernism. The Tenth Anniversary Stadium. Architects Jerzy Hryniewiecki, Marek Leykam and Czesław Rajewski, 1953–1955 (photograph from Ciborowski and Jankowski 1971, photographer E. Kupiecki).



**Figure 5.2b.** The Trojan Horse of Modernism. Scenes from the musical *Here Comes the Youth!* depict stiff and repressed ZMP members before the World Youth Festival and ZMP members ‘injected with freedom’ once the festival is underway (photographs by Michał Englert, courtesy of Warsaw’s Teatr Współczesny).



a musical which has been receiving standing ovations in Warsaw since November 2008, depicts the oppressive boredom of young men and women living in puritan ZMP hostels in the months leading up to the festival. They seek an outlet for their repressed rebellion and eroticism by wistfully listening to *Summertime* or *Rum & Coca Cola* on Voice of America radio, or by covertly fraternising with local *bikiniarze*, the bohemian dropouts of the Stalinist 1950s. The musical portrays the stifling of these 'natural' tendencies by tyrannical political commissars and by the obligatory *kapuś* (collaborator), a fellow member of the ZMP exceptionally devoted to pursuing the Party's dictates – depicted as short, spotty, pathologically enamoured by authority and alien to the lifestyle and longings of his 'normal' peers.

As the festival gets underway, however, the *Summertime*, which had previously been the subject of tense dreams fed by banned airwaves, explodes into the reality of a hot August in Warsaw. As ZMP members, *bikiniarze* and foreigners engage in fleeting romances and dance wildly in the streets to the *Banana Song* and *Rock Around the Clock*, even the dastardly *kapuś* sheds his red tie and succumbs to the uncontrollable forces of change sweeping the city. According to Piątek, it is no accident that the Stadion Dziesięciolecia was the primary setting from which this 'wave of freedom' was launched. The geometry of the stadium, the 'complex play of the formal ellipse within a circle' was firmly inscribed into the legacy of 'worldwide modernism' (Piątek 2008: 23). The Palace of Culture had been opened several days before the beginning of the Festival, on 22 July 1955. 'In the span of a week or so it transpired that the regime also had another face, a face beyond the Party, that of a cosmopolitan intellectual' (2008: 23). Whereas for David Crowley, the Palace of Culture had been the 'Trojan horse' of socialist realism in Warsaw (Crowley 2003), Piątek refers to the stadium as the 'Trojan horse' of modernism (2008: 23).

The stadium's architects received the highest state prizes for architecture in 1955. In tandem, de-Stalinisation gathered pace. Beginning in April 1955, the architectural press published a number of articles systematically decrying the Stalinist legacy and attempting to determine a new direction for Polish architecture. One author coined a phrase that would ensure a second life for his text more than four decades after its publication. According to Strachocki, the integrity of Polish architecture during the post-war decade was only maintained thanks to the activities of an anti-Stalinist 'architectural resistance movement'. The insubordinate members of this movement were instrumental in keeping alive a 'thread of continuity', both with 'recent achievements in western architecture' as well as with the 'indigenous needs and possibilities' which socialist realism is said to have ignored, despite its rhetoric of 'rootedness' and 'national form' (Strachocki 1957: 8–10).

## From obsequiousness to rebellion: a typology of resistance

The term 'resistance movement' is today frequently used to refer to those 'avant-garde' modernist projects which 'held their own' during the darkest years of socialist realism. The narrative surrounding the 'resistance movement' suggests three distinct modes according to which Polish architects responded to the imposition of socialist realism, varying along a complex, non-linear spectrum including positions of submissive accommodation and active rebellion. Architects who might have been expected to 'resist', but did not, tend to be presented as 'obsequious' individuals of 'feeble' character, whereas modernist architecture which carries an obvious trace of socialist realist intervention is often characterised as absurd and farcical. On the other hand, a number of 'strategies of resistance' are delimited, varying from the intermediary 'meandering' or 'procrastination', to 'active rebellion', which could take the form of a canny ability to realise modernist designs 'despite' overriding dogma, a refusal to work, or a 'mocking' stylistic over-identification with socialist realism. These categories, of course, are not mutually exclusive. The division between procrastination and rebellion is shifting and unclear, and 'mocking' could easily be confused with 'obsequiousness'.

### *'Obsequiousness'*

Helena and Szymon Syrkus, mentioned above as designers of the functionalist Koło II and Praga I housing estates in the years of 'ideological camouflage' (Majewski 2003) between 1945 and 1949, had been among the most vigorous and well-known promoters of radical, avant-garde modernism in Eastern Europe before 1939. Both had long been declared communists, but the eagerness with which they embraced the new political and aesthetic regime after 1949 came as a surprise to many. The pages of the architectural press and the minutes of architects' meetings from the Stalinist period are replete with condemnations of 'cosmopolitanism' and 'western influences' from both Helena and Szymon. I have often heard Warsaw architects and scholars express the feeling that the post-war Szymon and Helena Syrkus had turned into rather dismal individuals, broken and psychologically scarred by their wartime experiences (Szymon survived Auschwitz) and unable to summon the strength to engage in the 'resistance' which otherwise would have been expected of them.

The Muranów housing estate (see Fig. 5.3), built on the ruins of a section of the wartime Jewish ghetto, was designed by Bohdan Lachert, another leading representative of Warsaw's radically left-wing, avant-garde modernists in the interwar years. The diarist Leopold Tyrmand judged

Lachert to be ‘known for his obsequiousness’ (Tyrmand 1995 [1954]: 203, Piątek’s translation). Lachert’s architecture is said to carry a much more tangible testimony to this ‘obsequiousness’, however, than the verbal and textual declarations of the Syrkuses. Lachert agreed to change his original design for Muranów after 1949, but the alterations were introduced late, and could only be applied to the exterior facades of some of the buildings. This resulted in the earliest completed blocks in the complex, from 1950, featuring historicising detailing, bas-reliefs and neo-classical porticoes on one side, and taking the form of functionalist blocks with long access balconies on the other. Today, the architecture critic Jarosław Trybuś dismisses the estate’s architecture as ‘functionalism at a fancy-dress party’ after Tyrmand, who mocked it in his 1954 diaries as ‘reminiscent of a costume ball of schizophrenics posing as Napoleon, Julius Caesar and Nebuchadnezzar, with glued-on beards, eyebrows and moustaches, just like a small-town theatre’ (Tyrmand 1995: 103).



**Figure 5.3a.** The Muranów Estate. ‘Functionalism at a fancy dress party’. Architect Bochdan Lachert, 1948–1956. Modernist access balconies at the rear of one of the blocks.



**Figure 5.3b.** The Muranów Estate. ‘Functionalism at a fancy dress party’. Architect Bochdan Lachert, 1948–1956. A grand entrance portico at the front.

### *‘Meanderers/Procrastinators’*

The next category of architects are said to be those, who, in Piątek’s description, succeeded in ‘intelligently meandering between socialist realism and modernism’. Tyrmand praised ‘a few clever procrastinators who rebel carefully and effectively, all the more so because their knowledge and talent make them strong’ (Tyrmand 1995: 201, Piątek’s translation). The project for the Tenth Anniversary stadium (co-authored by Leykam) is frequently cited as the clearest instance of this kind of cautious rebellion. It is sometimes suggested that whereas architects like Lachert submissively ‘lacquered’ their modernist designs with elaborate decorative features, Leykam’s ‘resistance’ manifested itself most clearly through a ‘mocking’ or ‘playful’ distortion of or over-identification with canonical, socialist realist forms. For example, he re-conceived one previously criticised design

as a monumental five-storey rectangle, clad in bold, rusticated masonry, containing an elaborate arcaded courtyard topped by a strikingly modern concrete dome cut through with circular skylights, completed in 1952 and assigned to house the office of the Government Presidium. A PhD thesis currently being completed by one Warsaw architect argues that Leykam's frustration at the pedantic rejections he suffered led him to 'mock' socialist realist dogma by designing a Party office in a style at once inflected with elements of modernist design and subversive in its quasi-historicist invocation of the early renaissance Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, identified as a material embodiment of 'proto-capitalism'. In a similar vein, a 2006 Warsaw travel guide refers to the building as a 'veiled parody of socialist realist principles', whose facades are simultaneously modern and 'variations on the theme of a 15<sup>th</sup> century Florentine banker's palace' (Omilanowska and Majewski 2006: 133).

### *'Rebels'*

The next category consists of those architects whom the diarist Tyrmand referred to as 'clearly identifiable rebels' (Tyrmand 1995: 201). In Tyrmand's description, 'they do not build; they are frowned upon and vegetate in teaching jobs' (1995: 201). Some of the designs produced by this group of architects eventually saw fruition during the period of the most intensive de-Stalinisation; these include the four 'radically modern' (Leśniakowska 2003: 205) cross-city stations of Warsaw's suburban railway: Ochota, Śródmieście, Powiśle and Stadion, designed by Arseneusz Romanowicz and Piotr Szymaniak in the mid- to late 1950s, and built between 1956 and 1965, featuring expansive curtain walls as well as dramatically curved and pointed roofs and pavilions. Contemporary commentators are often keen to emphasise the determination of architects who produced avant-garde designs despite official condemnation and a lack of up-to-date access to international journals and publications, especially during Stalinism but also after the thaw. The critic Marta Leśniakowska points out that Polish publications were diligently censored throughout the PRL era, and only after the mid-1950s did very few carefully selected foreign publications become available, placed in single copies in several libraries. In Piątek's words, 'It is comforting for me, as a Pole, that despite these wild barriers, during a time when one copy of some journal or other would reach the Association of Polish Architects, from which it would be passed hand-to-hand among the whole community of architects, designs like Romanowicz's cross-city railway stations were created and realised'<sup>6</sup>

### **‘The most cosmopolitan building in Poland’: the Central Department Store**



**Figure 5.4a.** The Central Department Store, Zbigniew Ihnatowicz and Jerzy Romański, 1948–1951. The CDT in 1951 (courtesy of the investor, CDI, photographer unknown).

In order to shed some light on the complex medley of associations and connotations attached to the architectural ‘resistance movement’ in Warsaw, I want to look in more detail at a building which is frequently pinpointed as Warsaw’s foremost piece of ‘actively rebellious’ architecture, the city’s first post-war Central Department Store (see Fig. 5.4a). Designed by Zbigniew Ihnatowicz and Jerzy Romański, the CDT (*Centralny Dom Towarowy*) was the winning entry in a contest organised by the Association of Polish Architects (SARP) in 1948, just before the introduction of socialist realism as the mandatory creative doctrine.

The building and its designers were subjected to intense criticism at meetings and in the architectural press after 1949. In the course of a discussion about the CDT organised by the Association of Polish Architects in November 1951 (documented in the journal *Architektura*), the CDT



**Figure 5.4b.** The Central Department Store, Zbigniew Ihnatowicz and Jerzy Romański, 1948–1951. The CDT today; a visualisation of the refurbished CDT (courtesy of the investor).

was showered with damning statements: ‘There is no doubt’, according to one architect participating in the discussion, that the CDT’s architecture ‘is clear formalism and cosmopolitanism of the purest kind’ (SARP 1952: 100). In a statement that has been gleefully appropriated by the CDT’s admirers today, another architect declares, ‘There could hardly be any more drums and cymbals amidst this jazzy clamour’ (1952: 100). Despite these routine condemnations, the CDT was doggedly completed at the end of 1951, without any substantial changes being made to the original design (Leśniakowska 2003: 34).

The CDT did not have to wait long for its rehabilitation. According to a 1958 article in *Architektura*, ‘the CDT is soaked in modernity’ (Strachocki 1958: 214). The author compared the ‘anachronistic’ image of a horse-drawn cart in front of the department store, with the ‘fitting sight’ of a modern motorcar against the same background, adding ‘how painlessly the main façade lends itself to the serpentine form of the neon advertisement on its front’ (Strachocki 1958: 214).

In September 1975, however, the building was partially destroyed by fire. Although it was subsequently reconstructed, many of today’s commenta-

tors consider Polish modernism in the 1970s to have turned very dull and formulaic in comparison to the innovative, radical design characteristic of the 1950s and early 1960s. The architect Andrzej Chołdzyński describes the post-1975 CDT as a 'banal and flat ... caricature of the protoplast from the 1950s' (cited in Bartoszewicz 2008 in *Gazeta Stołeczna*), whereas a recent newspaper article compares the 'refined partitions between the window panels' before the fire with the 'homogenous, brown glass shell' that replaced it (Zieliński 2009 in *Dziennik*).

At a lively press conference in November 2008, the building's owners declared their intention to refurbish CDT, recreating the 'avant-garde' glamour of the store's first incarnation. According to the developer's plans, the building's exterior will be restored to its original condition, the giant spiral neon arrow on its side will be returned to the façade, and the octogenarian avant-garde artist Wojciech Fangor, commissioned in 1955 to design uncompleted mosaics for the building's interiors, has been engaged to finish his work. The investor's marketing campaign placed tremendous emphasis on the historical significance of the department store, and this strategy was rewarded by the extensive attention the project received in the press as well as on internet forums and blogs. One journalist heaped praise on the proposal to restore the 'metropolitan chic' of the CDT, which 'during the previous regime was considered the most cosmopolitan building in Poland' (Jóźwicki 2008 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*), while another referred to the store as the most vivid example of the tendency in the first years after the war to continue 'the most fashionable stylistic trends of pre-1939 Poland ... created with such flair and fantasy as if the city's death had never taken place' (Zieliński 2009 in *Dziennik*).

According to a citation from the architect's son in the developer's pamphlet, the CDT 'materialised dreams of a new, better world and a modern Warsaw. Its glass, avant-garde façade was to be, as my father put it, "a giant lantern shining from afar", as if cutting across the greyness of its surroundings at the time' (Centrum Development Investments 2008: 17). The architect Andrzej Chołdzyński, commissioned to oversee the building's restoration, describes the CDT's design as 'a dream in ruined Warsaw of the elegant, modernist, plentiful world of the West'. For Chołdzyński, whereas the architects 'took inspiration' from the arch-modernist Le Corbusier and the German expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn, they also intended the CDT to be a 'distinctively Varsovian building' rooted in the rich heritage of Warsaw's interwar modernist architecture, the embodiment of a period, during which, in Chołdzyński's characterisation, 'Poland steamed forward like a transatlantic ocean liner'. Chołdzyński is very keen to emphasise the significance of the building's role during the 1950s and 1960s, as a result of which it 'has written itself into the history and material culture of this



place, a 'beacon' testifying to the continuity of Polish culture with its own past and with the international heritage to which it belongs. According to Chołdzyński, in the CDT's heyday there 'reigned a chic which was Polish, native, but simultaneously European and worldly' (Bartoszewicz 2008 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*).

### From the 'period of devastation' to the rise of the cosmopolitan aesthetic

The developer behind CDT's 'revitalisation', Centrum Development Investments (CDI), is the privatised successor to Poland's former state department store company. The firm is currently undertaking similar projects at several of its properties, with those considered to be examples of 'exceptional' architecture from the PRL period receiving the most attention. The timing of CDI's interest in 'revamping the splendour' of the 'forgotten pearls' of Polish modernist architecture in its portfolio has coincided with the initiation of a number of other, comparable redevelopment projects in Warsaw, including several relating to buildings discussed earlier in this text.<sup>7</sup>

The Government Presidium Office – Marek Leykam's 'Florentine palazzo' – is currently owned by one of Poland's wealthiest businessmen, whose investment firm plans to transform the building from a 'pride of socialism' into a 'luxury office centre', while staying true to its past by carefully 'underlining all of the building's positive features' and installing a memorial plaque to Leykam (Wojtczuk 2006 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*). Further, a modernisation project underway at Ochota and Powiśle cross-city railway stations since early 2008 is intended to allow Arseneusz Romanowicz's mid-1950s, neglected 'wilting flowers' to 'blossom' once more (Bartoszewicz 2007 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*). A recent newspaper article reports the hope of the railway authorities that the revitalised stations, referred to as 'pearls of the avant-garde', whose architecture is 'modest, but on a world level' (Bartoszewicz 2007 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*), will impress crowds of fans from all over the world travelling to Warsaw for the European Football Championships in 2012.

The revitalisation programme at the cross-city stations, however, encompassed only the most visible parts of the buildings. A distinctive, mushroom-shaped ticket hall at the lower end of the Powiśle station, bypassed in the railway authorities' project, was taken over in the spring of 2009 by a group of young 'cultural entrepreneurs', intent on creating a culture and entertainment venue in a setting which does justice to the dynamic, quirky atmosphere generated by the architecture of the pavilion. Since opening, the Powiśle café has held several meetings and lectures concerned with War-

saw's built environment, including a packed discussion marking the publication of a special issue of the *Architektura* monthly, devoted to promoting the conservation of Poland's post-war modernist architectural heritage (see Fig. 5.5b). And the Warsaw architectural community's favourite society event, the 2009 *Architektura* ball, devoted the proceeds from ticket sales to financing the restoration of the old neon sign gracing the Powiśle pavilion.<sup>8</sup>

The fate of Supersam, a supermarket designed as early as 1953 but only built between 1959 and 1962, sheds light on some of the circumstances leading to the development of this trend. Despite two years of intensifying dissent, Supersam was eventually demolished in December 2006 to make way for a large commercial and residential development. Supersam's passing was followed by a number of 'memorial' events, including a 'posthumous homage' in the form of an exhibition at the prestigious Kordegarda gallery (Kowalska 2007 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*), and the act of its destruction is still regularly invoked with revulsion by the ever-more numerous defenders of PRL/era modernism. Piątek told me he considers the public outcry which followed Supersam's demise to have been a 'pivotal moment,' which resulted in an increased public awareness of the significance of Warsaw's modernist buildings in its architectural heritage.



**Figure 5.5a.** A public meeting devoted to Warsaw modernist architecture at the Warszawa Powiśle station café (photograph courtesy of Monika Zajęc).



**Figure 5.5b.** An after-party at the station café (photograph courtesy of Monika Zajęc).

The January 2008 demolition of the derelict Skarpa Cinema (built between 1956 and 1960) was similarly widely mourned. The elaborate mosaics from the interior of the cinema have been salvaged by a Warsaw hospice (Majewski 2009 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*), and the giant neon sign that used to decorate the front of the cinema has found its way into the collection being assembled by Warsaw's Museum of Modern Art (see Fig. 5.6a). The first exhibition of the nascent collection organised at the museum's temporary home referred to the Skarpa neon sign as 'a testimony to the changes as a result of which many valuable examples of historical architecture and design are being destroyed as private investment aggressively pushes into public space' (Sztuka Cenniejsza Niż Złoto 2008). Both Supersam and the Skarpa cinema are now immortalised in an avowedly sentimental collection of six miniature ceramic replicas of PRI/era modernist buildings. The young designer behind the creation and marketing of the figures claims to have done so with the intention of making Varsovians 'reflect on the fact that these symbols of the city landscape may disappear irretrievably' (see Fig. 5.6a).

Piątek points out that the demolition of several important modernist buildings in the 1990s passed by unnoticed, with almost no significant discussions or protests in the everyday press, whereas the architect Andrzej Chołdzyński recalled that CDI's first question to him ('several years ago') regarding the CDT department store was concerned with how it could be most effectively torn down. In 2004 and 2006, however, the firm willingly participated in the process of placing CDT (as well as several of its other Polish properties) under the protection of the register of historical monuments. According to one journalist, things have changed since the 'period of devastation' during the 1990s and early 2000s. Debates in architecture are ahead of those between politicians, and 'the climate of reckoning' has given way to a more 'tolerant, relativistic' atmosphere (Jarecka 2007 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*). This trend towards a more careful, allegedly 'mature' attitude to the past is developing despite the fact that, as one critic pointed out, brute market logic should dictate that twentieth-century architecture is more at risk in Warsaw than anywhere else in Poland, and more in the last few years than ever before (Majewski 2006 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*). Since Poland's entry into the European Union, ground rents have been rising at



**Figure 5.6a.** Mourning modernism after the 'period of devastation'. The neon sign from the Skarpa cinema (architect Zygmunt Stępiński, designed in 1953, built 1956–1960, demolished in 2008) at the Museum of Modern Art, December 2008.



**Figure 5.6b.** Mourning modernism after the ‘period of devastation.’ A miniature ceramic replica of Kino Skarpa, designed by Magdalena Łapińska, 2009 (photographer Jan Kriwol).

the fastest level since 1989, and the potential for profit has increased with an exponential growth in consumption. How, then, is the recent popularity of PRL era modernist architecture to be explained?

### **‘There is no distinction without locality’: good taste and the vernacular universal versus pseudo-cosmopolitanism**

In an article evaluating the condition of Polish architecture since 1989, the critic Piątek gives clear expression to a widespread attitude which identifies the development of an authentic, developed ‘normality’ with sophistication, maturity and moderation, as opposed to a reckless, post-traumatic gigantomania. Although he believes that Poland recovered a sense of ‘normalcy’ after 1989, the recovery was followed by a regression into a new kind of fragmentation and disarray, dictated primarily by the whims of the market and a naïve embrace of the possibilities of unhampered creativity and free enterprise. Emphasising the value of restraint, he questions whether Poland’s ‘recovered normalcy’ needs to seek affirmation in ever more dramatic architectural ‘icons’ and ‘monuments’ (Piątek 2006: 98). The

concerns expressed about the ‘abnormal’, overblown scale and incoherence of some of Warsaw’s recent architecture are also frequently layered with suspicion regarding their ‘unanchored’ or ‘rootless’ abstraction, unsuited to Warsaw’s existing or desired character.

For some, the explosion of showy projects designed by multinational architectural practices and the workshops of celebrity ‘starchitects’ such as Norman Foster, Daniel Libeskind and Zaha Hadid, is the most tangible marker of Warsaw’s perceived journey from the global ‘periphery’ to a cosmopolitan ‘centre’. Others, however, believe that the susceptibility of Warsaw’s decision-makers to be charmed by the ‘superficial’ prestige of big-brand architecture testifies to the city’s status as a ‘second-rate’, subaltern version of the global city, unfamiliar with or unable to respect its own identity. Marta Leśniakowska is amongst those who sound a note of caution. The ‘influx of massive capital, new technology and new architecture of a scale hitherto unknown’ in Warsaw reproduces the ‘current model of the cosmopolitan metropolis’, whose effect is the transformation of Warsaw into another branch of the self-perpetuating, fractal archetype of the globalised ‘generic city’, devoid of authenticity or locality (Leśniakowska 2004 after Koolhaas and Mau 1995).

The text of a lavish promotional volume, published to advertise Libeskind’s new 192-metre residential tower, opens by proclaiming: ‘Warsaw was always at the heart of Europe, but now its beat is beginning to follow Europe’s lively rhythm. New energy is liberated here every day, which allows Warsaw to keep abreast of world trends, *themselves acquiring new values in the Polish capital*’ (Orco 2009, emphasis added). As if to avert accusations of rootless abstraction, Libeskind’s tower is presented as a manifestation of this symbiosis, ‘a very particular building which could only be created here ... Its creator knows this city and its history – he has a feeling for its past’ (Orco 2009).

Despite such pre-emptive rhetoric, many in Warsaw pour scorn on attempts by international starchitects to decorate their buildings with a local lustre. Andrzej Chołdzyński, the architect of CDT’s revitalisation, describes Libeskind as a ‘person from nowhere’. For Chołdzyński, ‘Libeskind is neither from Łódź’ – the Polish city in which Libeskind was born and spent his childhood – ‘nor is he from New York’. Chołdzyński is just as unappreciative of Iraqi-born, British architect Zaha Hadid, whom he accuses of having managed, despite herself, to become another ‘person from nowhere’. ‘She spent half an hour in Warsaw drinking a cocktail’ and now is qualified to design gigantic buildings in the middle of the city. Chołdzyński argued that the ‘generic’, pseudo-cosmopolitanism of the Libeskind-Hadid mould is shallow and inconsequential, because it negates the imperative to negotiate between the vernacular and the universal. For Chołdzyński, ‘it is

impossible to be worldly, and to be from nowhere,' there is 'no distinction without locality'.

These statements represent a tendency to claim that contemporary Warsaw should build upon its own, pre-existing heritage of cosmopolitanism, which was not merely 'indigenously' formulated, but was so strongly rooted that it was able to survive the retrogressive, totalitarian ravages of socialist realism. In its attempt to straddle the boundary between the vernacular and the universal, the notion of cosmopolitanism with which Warsaw's modernist architecture is identified appears to resemble the 'oxymoronic' reconfigurations of cosmopolitanism, towards the 'rooted' (Appiah 1998, 2005), 'vernacular' (Bhabha 1996) or 'discrepant' (Clifford 1992) expounded by writers seeking to move away from the universal Kantian model of cosmopolitanism as world citizenship. In Pnina Werbner's rendition, for example, 'cosmopolitanism ... does not necessarily imply an absence of belonging, but the possibility of belonging to more than one ethnic and cultural localism simultaneously' (Werbner 1999: 34). Warsaw's architectural cosmopolitanism reflects the 'emancipatory' connotations of these oxymoronic cosmopolitanisms in its derivation from a heritage of resistance to 'totalitarianism' and aesthetic 'homogeneity' and in its contemporary opposition to the depredations of 'wild' capitalism.

Simultaneously, however, this does not stop it from being intrinsically tied to notions of class, refinement and distinction. As Piątek recognises, the re-discovery of Poland's modernist architectural heritage is still an 'elite phenomenon,' alien to the tastes of many ordinary Poles. At the same time, however, many critics applaud the apparent shift towards an increasingly widespread appreciation of modernist aesthetics. According to the architect Chołdzyński, this developing 'refinement' can be partly explained by increases in disposable income and mobility. As he put it, 'Poles who visit Paris antique shops are becoming accustomed to the notion that a piece of furniture from the 1940s or 1950s can be more expensive than one from the baroque. Poles are wealthier, they travel, and their financial independence is expressed in a greater cultural refinement and understanding of the world.'

At a fashionable café in *Saska Kępa*, a leafy, riverside district endowed with a high concentration of interwar, functionalist villas and apartment blocks, a well-groomed audience took part in a discussion about local architecture. The *Saska Kępa*-dwellers shared anecdotes and commented on a collectively compiled slideshow of photographs and drawings depicting the *Saska Kępa* of the interwar period, a 'multicultural, tolerant, ecumenical' quarter of villas, gardens, sleek motorcars and smart restaurants, which, they largely agreed, was slowly coming back to life. Some old photographs were shown of a thirteen-storey residential tower designed by Marek

Leykam at the edge of the district. When it was completed in 1963, the building featured Warsaw's first all-glass curtain wall, but the glass planes leaked and had to be replaced by prefabricated concrete slabs several years later. Half-jokingly, several residents discounted this 'practical' explanation, and suggested that the real reason lay in the communist attempt to diversify the district's social make-up, traditionally dominated by the intelligentsia and upper-middle classes; someone recounted the anecdote that Leykam was so distressed by the sight of the frilly lace curtains with which the building's new inhabitants disfigured its smooth, transparent façade, that he decided the curtain wall had to be concreted over.

The meeting's attendees were also impressed by 1950s and 1960s photographs of Leykam's co-authored Tenth-Anniversary Stadium, situated just to the north of the quarter's boundary. Remarks were made about the excellent integration of the stadium's design with the 'spirit' of the luxury modernist buildings nearby, regret was voiced at its passing, and uncertainty was expressed as to the consequences of the bombastic new National Stadium currently being built on the site. There was very little mention, however, of the ramshackle cosmopolitanism of the Jarmark Europa, in its 1990s heyday the largest outdoor bazaar in Europe, with most of its traders and much of its clientele hailing from Vietnam, West Africa, India, Uzbekistan or the Ukraine, built on the crown and around the decaying, disused Stadium after 1989.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

For John Binnie et al., it is impossible to overlook class when discussing the practices, competencies and preferences attendant to being an 'urban cosmopolite'. City-dwelling practitioners of cosmopolitanism draw symbolic boundaries between 'acceptable' and 'non-acceptable' difference, which often 'translate into a defence of locality' particularly through an imperative to preserve selected elements of the local architectural heritage (Binnie et al. 2006: 16). From this point of view, the recruitment of Warsaw's modernist architectural heritage to bolster the notion of an 'indigenous', Polish cosmopolitanism is simultaneously 'oxymoronic' and restrictive, embedded in processes of resistance as well as processes of domination. As in Hannerz's (1990) characterisation of the 'cosmopolitan ethos', critiqued by Werbner for its transcendent understanding of cosmopolitanism as entailing the 'absence of belonging', Warsaw's architectural cosmopolites cultivate an 'intellectual and aesthetic openness' to disparate, radical or innovative experiences and encounters. However, they are almost all members of an educated, well-off elite; they seek to ingrain an 'cosmopolitan' aesthetic in the



quotidian reality of the city, but self-consciously define themselves against those people, buildings and social forces (past and present), whose aesthetic deviates away from 'good' towards 'bad' architecture in the spectrum of distinction – whether these happen to be unwieldy Stalinist columnades, ramshackle pavement bazaars or wacky corporate skyscrapers.

Standing in active opposition to these myriad abnormalities are the 'flowers' and 'pearls of the avant-garde', glamorous 'lanterns shining from afar', 'transatlantic ocean liners' and subversively modern Florentine Palazzos, which are said to have meandered, procrastinated and rebelled against attempts to drag the city onto a course aberrant to its (allegedly) natural trajectory during the years of the Polish People's Republic.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in the imagination of the cosmopolitan aesthetic, these select elements of Warsaw's built environment have not outlived their usefulness. Today, they are hailed as the raw materials, which, if properly harvested, are to allow an authentically cosmopolitan but doggedly indigenous Warsaw of the twenty-first century to come into being.

## NOTES

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1. As the narrator in Leopold Tyrmand's novel *Zły* remarks after surveying Warsaw's rooftops, 'In the fifties everybody in Warsaw knew at least a little about architecture, in the same way that everyone knew about gold hunting once upon a time in Alaska. Architecture was the main interest of nearly everybody in this city' (Tyrmand 1990 [1955]: 51). Many in Warsaw agree that, to an extent, this observation still applies today. Warsaw's built environment is particularly productive ground on which to observe whether or not buildings are capable of functioning as agentic entities in their own right, 'full blown actors' (Latour 2005: 70) exerting a (more or less) autonomous impact on social relations. See also my presentation of this issue in relation to Warsaw's rebuilt Old Town (Murawski 2009).
2. A seminal text by Boris Groys (1992) challenged the established view among Western art historians (Greenberg 1986; Gray 1962) that Stalinist socialist realism constituted a radical departure from the avant-garde of the 1920s, pointing out the totalising politico-aesthetic dynamic that both projects shared. Castillo (1995) has applied Groys' argument to architecture. Significantly, although Groys' book has gained widespread currency in Western Europe and

the US since its publication, most of the Polish art and architecture critics I spoke with about his work seemed reluctant to accept such a radical continuity between modernism and socialist realism.

3. If the attitudes of Warsaw's 'cosmopolitan aesthetes' towards socialist realism are orientalist, Castillo (1997) shows that socialist realist attitudes towards the eastern realms of the Soviet Union were no less so. Any notion of the eastwards movement of cultural essentialisms is disrupted, however, by the extent to which socialist realists' attitudes towards Inner Asian vernacular traditions paralleled their approach to the Polish 'national style'.
4. I refer here to the notion of the 'normal' and 'pathological' developed by Georges Canguilhem (1989) in reference to medicine and biology. In his work on the Panopticon, Canguilhem's pupil Foucault (1979) was the first to suggest a link between procedures of normalisation and architecture. It is interesting to observe that the connotations attached to the post-1989 'return to normality' in Poland are paralleled remarkably closely throughout many of the eastern European countries struggling to define their attachments to a politically and economically shifting European continent over the last two decades. See Fehérvári (2002); Rausing (2002); Kiossev (2008).
5. For a parallel description of the consolidation of socialist realism in the German Democratic Republic, see Castillo (2008).
6. This example in particular brings to mind Bruce Robbins' (1998) notion of 'actually-existing cosmopolitanism.' See Humphrey (2004) for a description of a 'make-do,' actually-existing cosmopolitan practice in Soviet Russia, as distinguished from the officially-condemned notion of *kosmopolitizm*, the former flourishing despite the enveloping crackdown on the latter.
7. It is important to point out that the rapid growth in conservationist attitudes towards post-war architecture has not been limited to modernism. The Palace of Culture (in 2007) and several other socialist realist buildings have recently been written into the register of historical monuments. Advocates of protecting the Palace tended to point out how much high-quality Polish craftsmanship found its way into the interiors 'despite' socialist realist strictures (see also n.9) or to carefully adopt 'apolitical' postures, arguing that the Palace is a 'unique,' fascinating oddity, academically significant, or too expensive to destroy.
8. A recent text about the Powiśle station building and Warsaw's PRL era modernist architecture in *Blueprint* magazine neatly reproduces many elements of the discourse surrounding Warsaw's cosmopolitan aesthetic in English. See Kelly (2009).
9. On the other hand, there have also been notable attempts to integrate the stadium's past and present, and to an extent even the bazaar itself, into a consciously wide-ranging vision of cosmopolitan Warsaw. See Warsza(2009). The bazaar debate intensified at a new site in 2009 during the ongoing and sometimes violent process of closing and dismantling two large, corrugated trade halls that have stood on the Parade Square in front of the Palace of Culture since the 1990s. Humphrey and Skvirskaja (2009) examine similar issues in relation to a container market outside Odessa, Ukraine.

10. It is useful to point out that some architects and critics in Warsaw have a tendency to claim that there is not really any 'pure' socialist realism in Warsaw (of the sort said to be seen, for example, in Moscow), since all Polish architects were culturally hard-wired to undermine it. It is frequently claimed that the only 'really' Stalinist building in Warsaw is the Palace of Culture, designed by a Soviet architect. However, even this is sometimes called into question. Leśniakowska and several others have repeated to me the suggestion that perhaps the Palace's 'svelte' proportions (relative to the alleged 'Byzantine' dumpiness of Stalin's Moscow skyscrapers) suggest that its architects must have been influenced by the more 'European' visual language which they witnessed and to some extent absorbed when working on the project in Poland.

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### EXHIBITION

Sztuka Cenniejsza niż Złoto, held at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (6 December 2008–24 January 2009).