

(A)political Buildings: Ideology, Memory and Warsaw's 'Old Town' by G. Michał Murawski

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The field of relations between ideology and Warsaw's Old Town was dense and complex during its reconstruction after the Second World War, and during the later years of the Polish People's Republic (PRL – Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa in Polish). Yet, despite the discursive prevalence of apolitical attitudes towards culture in post-communist, late capitalist Poland, ideology did not disappear with the fall of the PRL in 1989. I will open this text by examining the relationship between the ideologisation of Warsaw's Old Town during its reconstruction in the 1940s and early 1950s and the establishment of the so-called Polish School of Conservation in architecture. Building on the work of contemporary commentators who have examined the manner in which the Polish School's approach to conservation explicitly lent itself to co-optation by the ideological programme of the Polish United Workers' Party (Martyn 2001, Crowley 2003, Lesniakowska 2004, Majewski 2009), I will examine why this attempt to channel memory in a very particular direction had unexpected political consequences.

In the anthropologist Caroline Humphrey's metaphor, buildings function as prisms, 'gathering meanings and scattering them again, yet not randomly. As a prism has a given number of faces, the light it scatters has direction.' (Humphrey 2005: 55) The effect the built environment has on its users is related to, but does not directly follow the aims of its designers – the relationship is also impacted on by many other agencies. Humphrey's Soviet prisms functioned in a 'formally ideologized' situation, where there was 'a definite pronounced intention of the state to make use of the materiality of dwelling to produce new social forms and moral values.' (Humphrey 2005: 2) In this text, I will go on to argue that it is also necessary to take into account the (often equally unpredictable) place of Warsaw's rebuilt historical monuments in the intricate ideological constellation of the contemporary, post-socialist city. I argue that architecture continues to fulfil a role in the every-

day production of social forms and moral values in the paradoxical setting of post-1989 Warsaw, where ideological 'intentions' are generated in part by consciously defining themselves against 'ideology', and against the 'totalitarian' idea that any part of society can be 'produced' at all.

I have often been struck by the extent to which buildings feature prominently in Warsaw's past, present and future, and by the manner in which architecture, as well as other actors that circulate around it are represented as exercising agency of their own, rather than just functioning as vessels for the inputs of human actors or blank slates which are merely imbued with or reflect discourses and ideologies. A diverse set of scholars have recently been engaged in efforts to 'flatten' (to greater or lesser extents) the purview of anthropology and other social sciences to recognise the relevance and impact of a more heterogeneous set of social actors than that which was encompassed in the terms of the old dichotomy between human subjects and overarching, determinant structures (See for example Callon 1986; Law 1991; Gell 1998; Latour 1993, 1996, 1998; 2004; 2005; Bennett 2004, 2007; Henare, Holbraad and Wastells 2007). Following in particular Alfred Gell's (1998) account of the agency of objects in the 'art nexus' and Bruno Latour's call to accept non-human objects as 'full-blown' actors (Latour 2005: 70) or non-derivative 'mediators' which 'transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry' (Ibid: 39), I aim to consider buildings and other entities which constitute Warsaw's built environment as capable of exercising an agency on a level comparable with that of human beings, and with the overarching political, economic, historical or cultural context which tends to be held to 'explain' the composition of Warsaw's built environment. To this end, I will consider how an understanding of the unpredictable agency of architecture can be illustrated by the work of several contemporary scholars of ideology and memory. (Zizek 1997, Forty 1999, Crowley 2003)

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**Political buildings and their limits:
The 'formally ideologised' Old Town**

When discussing the Second World War, images of the ruined city and statistics detailing Warsaw's material casualties comprise the most recognisable index of the city's wartime experience. 90 percent of the total urban fabric, including 85 percent of the buildings, were bombed, burned, dynamited or demolished. (Jankowski 1990: 75) Those buildings still standing after the siege of 1939, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, were systematically ravaged with explosives and flamethrowers, in accordance with Hitler's order that 'Warsaw has to be pacified, that is, razed to the ground.' (Jankowski 1990: 79) Of the 957 buildings which had been classified as historical monuments before the war, 782 were totally destroyed and 141 partly destroyed. (Ibid)

After the war, the decision was made to locate the capital city in Warsaw once more, and an audacious reconstruction programme was embarked upon by the communist government. The decision was made to rebuild Warsaw's most notable historical structures as near 'facsimiles' of how they had looked before 1939. Nevertheless, it has been widely commented upon that the ideology of the communist party had a formative impact on the choice of buildings to be rebuilt, as well as the manner in which the reconstruction work was carried out. The 'historic' city which was built in the decades after the war might, according to the architectural historian Peter Martyn, more accurately be said to have been *re-modelled* than reconstructed. Contrary to the frequently cited claim of the city architect in the early 1960s that 'the Old Town now looks as it used to long ago' (Ciborowski 1964: 248), it is clear that 'the Old Town in its rebuilt form never existed in the past.' (Martyn 2001: 216)

The pre-war form of Warsaw's Old Town itself was recorded in extensive drawings and photographic documentation produced throughout the 1930s and in secret during the German occupation. Despite this, the existence of a set of over twenty vedutas by Bernardo Bellotto, court-painter

of Poland's last king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, was invoked as a justification to rebuild sections of old Warsaw as they had appeared to the Venetian painter in the 1760s and 1770s. It was well-known that Bellotto permitted himself a considerable degree of artistic licence, and as the contemporary architectural critic Peter Martyn (2001: 211-212) documents, examples can be cited of individual buildings – such as John's House adjacent to the Castle Square (*fig. 1*), the Miodowa Street façade of the Branicki Palace and the Kraków Bishops' Palace on Senatorska Street – where details derived from Bellotto's imagination were transformed into reality nearly two centuries after their invention by the painter.

The importance attached to Bellotto's work was a result of the attention to detail which characterized many of his paintings, and his presence in Warsaw during the final decades of the eighteenth century, when the city was undergoing a considerable cultural revival, geographic expansion and political upheaval, just before the 1795 partition divided the Polish-Lithuanian state between Russia, Prussia and Austria. Bellotto's paintings were thought to capture the spirit of an epoch instantiated by the artistic patronage of the king, a figurehead of the so-called Polish Enlightenment, an era with which the nascent PRL seemed to identify. Bellotto's paintings, with their depictions of magnificent palaces rising from the midst of shabby wooden huts, were thought to encapsulate the optimistic spirit of a young and virile Warsaw, as yet unravaged by the excesses of untrammelled capitalism.

In a 1972 guide to Warsaw, the travel writer and Warsaw historian Olgierd Budrewicz affords Bellotto full credit in having 'taken part' in the reconstruction programme by 'assisting' engineers, architects and conservators in their work. Budrewicz is quite content to recognize the extent to which today's 'old' Warsaw is a simulation of Bellotto's canvases. Jean Baudrillard or Alfred Gell could hardly have made the point about the agentic power of images better than Budrewicz, when he writes, 'The panorama of Warsaw seen by Bellotto from the East bank of the Vistula *looks more like the present view of the city than did the*

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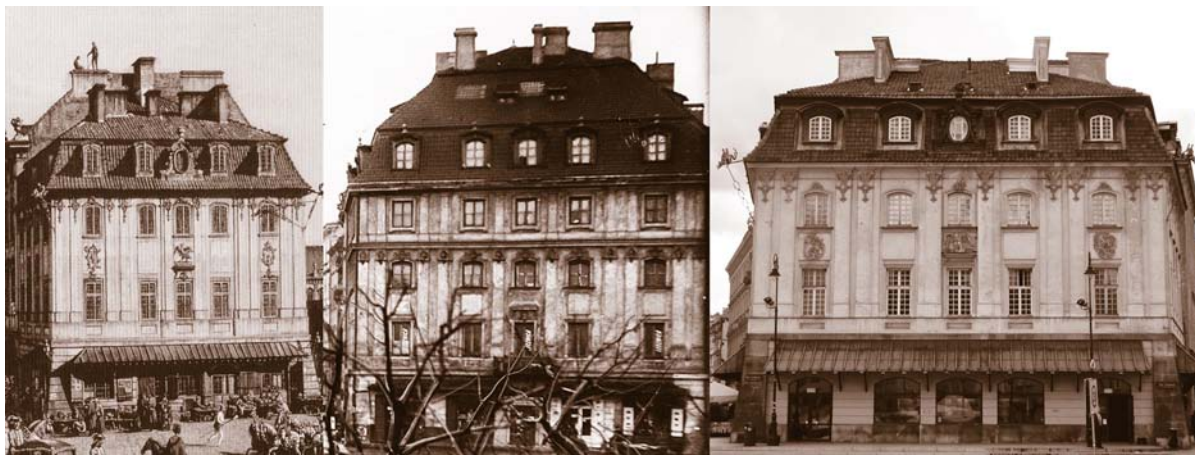


Fig. 1 - From left: John's House on Castle Square, mid-18th century, as depicted in Bernardo Bellotto's painting *Krakowskie Przedmieście from the side of the Kraków gate*, oil on canvas, 1767-8 (Photograph courtesy of the Royal Castle in Warsaw); John's House during the second decade of 20th century (author unknown?, photograph courtesy of the Institute of Arts of the Polish Academy of Sciences); John's House in 2009, reconstruction (1949) led by Kazimierz Thor and Włodzimierz Wapinski.

prewar skyline... The impression one gets today is that fragments of the paintings of the 18th century artist have been pasted into the living organism of the city. There can be no doubt that the present skyline of the Old Town, the most beautiful calling card of the Polish capital, would not exist without Bellotto.' (Budrewicz 1972: 69, emphasis added)

The reconstruction of Bellotto's Warsaw was perhaps the most prominent of several strategies pursued in defining the materiality and meaning of the post-WWII old city. Many of these strategies were linked to the various ambitions, both modernising and historicising, that Warsaw's architects, conservators and town-planners had cultivated for the city during the inter-war period and clandestinely under German occupation. As Stalinist socialist realism took over as the dominant creative doctrine after 1949, however, the tactic of picking out styles and artefacts from the city's history deemed 'progressive', and attempting to undermine or even extinguish the impact of material remainders from historical episodes considered 'reactionary', became very clearly articulated as a front in the struggle to create a built environment which was to be 'socialist in form' and 'national in content.'

Thus the reconstruction of Warsaw's St. John's Cathedral, carried out between 1947 and 1955,

removed the substantial neo-gothic alterations which had been made to the Church between 1837 and 1843. The reconstruction, led by Jan Zachwatowicz, aimed to create a façade and interior which alluded to the so-called 'Vistula Gothic' of the 14th and 15th centuries. In the imagination of Stalinist patriotism, such a domesticated, vernacular style was preferable to the Gothic revival of the 19th century building, redolent of 'Englishness' and 'cosmopolitanism'.

Nowy Świat, a principal shopping and leisure thoroughfare leading towards the Old Town, which had once contained numerous tenement blocks housing bourgeois residences, upmarket shops and cafes, had the height of its buildings regularized after 1945 to better suit its new purpose as a prestigious housing estate (*fig. 2*). On the suggestion of the lead architect of the street's reconstruction, Zygmunt Sepinski, tall surviving buildings were reduced to a height of three storeys (or knocked down altogether), and smaller ones heightened to conform with the overall visual scheme and to introduce a vaguely egalitarian air preferable to the rather precarious *laissez-faire* ambience the street had supposedly once exuded. Restrained neo-classical features adorned the façades of the post-war houses, recreating the dominant style during the 1815-30 semi-independent Polish Congress Kingdom,

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Fig. 2 - From left: Nowy Świat between 1915 and 1918 (author unknown?, Institute of Arts of the Polish Academy of Sciences); Nowy Świat in 2009, reconstruction led by Zygmunt Stepinski (c. 1946-1954).

in preference to the multi-storeyed eclecticism which made its presence felt on the street after the establishment in Tsarist Poland of great industrial and financial capital from the eighties of the 19th century. (cf. Lesniakowska 2004)

The process of planning and carrying out the rebuilding of Warsaw's Old Town, the first stage of which began in 1945 and lasted until 1953, is credited with leading to the development of what became known as the 'Polish school of conservation', centred around the historic monuments section of Warsaw's Capital Reconstruction Office (BOS - Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy). In the popular imagination, the so-called 'Polish school' is often associated with the meticulousness and attention to authentic historical detail said to characterise its work, the clearest manifestation of which is the iconic rebuilding of Warsaw's Old Town. On the other hand, it is crucial to point out that the 'Polish school' consciously postulated a doctrine which *negated* established notions of authenticity in architectural conservation. The broad emphasis in Poland's post-war reconstructions was on recreating the *purity* of architectural style, to embody in the walls of the rebuilt monuments a vision of the past suitable to the utilitarian and ideological demands of the present. Jan Zachwatowicz, the most prominent figurehead of the 'Polish school',

defined the task of post-war conservators as striving towards 'reconstructing the monuments of culture from their foundations, in order to hand down to the generations their precise, if not their authentic form.' (Zachwatowicz 1974: 446) Simultaneously, however, Zachwatowicz admitted he was aware of the 'conservatorial falsehood' this necessarily involved, but considered this a necessary, if, in his words, 'tragic', sacrifice to the greater good of rebuilding Poland's historical consciousness. (Ibid: 279)

Chronologically, the reconstruction of Warsaw was carried out in the context of socialist realism, established as the 'mandatory' creative doctrine in Poland between, roughly, 1949 and 1956. Today, historians such as Piotr Majewski (2009) and Marta Lesniakowska (2004) argue that architects working under the banner of socialist realism as well as avant-garde modernism were enthused by the blank slate which the war-time destruction of Warsaw's traditional urban fabric had laid out, and fascinated by the possibilities the devastated city provided for constructing a radically new built environment. The conservators of the 'Polish School' worked within the institutional framework of the Capital Reconstruction Office, which was simultaneously engaged in creating monumental town-planning schemes

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unapologetically criss-crossing the layout of the pre-war city. Materially also, as its 'conservators'' conscious self-identification with Viollet-le-Duc suggested, the new Old Town they envisioned was to be purposeful as well as picturesque and romantic, integrally embedded into the post-war task of bringing about a revolutionary transformation of the urban fabric. This at first sight curious sedimentation of historical reconstruction with modernism as well as socialist realism is lent clear expression in the figure of an architect like Zygmunt Stepinski, who was known for strong leanings towards modernism both before 1939 and after the decline of Stalinism. During the first decade after the war, however, Stepinski also led a number of Polish School historical reconstruction projects, among them John's House and Nowy Swiat (mentioned above), as well as being involved in the design of several flagship socialist realist infrastructural and housing developments.

I would like now to expand on the theme of the unpredictability of architecture, introduced by Caroline Humphrey's metaphor of the prism. In his 2003 text on Warsaw, David Crowley points out that there were limits to the Party's ability to bolster its legitimacy by harnessing the operation of the 'unruly' forces of history and memory. Crowley observes that the Old Town was more effective as a site for oppositionist vigils, events and demonstrations, than as a conduit for the political interests of the party. (Crowley 2003: 68-83) The Old Town was immersed in a myriad of complex and painful historical associations, and its incomplete resemblance to its pre-war predecessor was uncanny. Referring to the aspirations to photographic verisimilitude publicly articulated by the architects of the post-war Old Town, Crowley invokes Roland Barthes' theory of the photograph to illustrate his presentation of the complex, non-unidirectional agency of the reconstructed buildings. Barthes (1981) introduces the category of the *studium* to refer to the "official", consciously articulated reactions which a photograph elicits from its viewers, opposing this to the *punctum*, the piercing, affective discomfort which certain photographs have the capacity to provoke. According to Crowley, a subversive 'force of history', like a materialised *punctum*, exerted its enormous

unsettling capacity from the 'cracks' between the chocolate-box 'official' beauty of the houses.

As oppositionist efforts against the PRL regime gathered momentum in the 1970s, the market place, Castle Square and parts of the Royal Route were frequently chosen as venues for demonstrations. Vigils were frequently held on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, an event which until oppositionist pressure forced it irreversibly on the public agenda in the 1980s, had been 'forgotten,' or 'repressed' in official historical discourse. The demonstrations were intended to 'remind' the authorities that the Red Army had stood by on the Praga side of the Vistula, having liberated the city's right-bank weeks before the 63-day uprising's end, and watched the city burn, refusing to cross the river or even provide substantial air assistance. The state's own choice of Bellotto's Enlightenment Warsaw as its model to emulate (or simulate) began to seem especially injudicious when it was pointed out that the city's 18th century resurgence was short-lived, a delectable last supper before an earlier Russian occupation subjugated Warsaw for another 123 years.

The PRL's attempts to harness the force of memory can be understood in terms of two distinct, but overlapping narratives. According to the classical, Aristotelian tradition which posits a direct continuity between memory and the material objects which represent it, the act of rebuilding can be seen as an effort to ensure the continuity of the postwar Polish state with the traditions and history of its predecessor. This was understood by some commentators at the time as vital to the ensuring of social cohesion.

It is possible to supplement this understanding with an interpretation which regards the reconstruction as an act of what Adrian Forty calls 'counter-iconoclasm... remaking something in order to forget what its absence signified.' (Forty 1999: 10) This category questions the simple relationship between memory and its material analogues, and emphasises that a certain degree of forgetting is also necessary to guarantee social stability. If as Forty puts it, Freud argued that the purpose of psychoanalysis was 'to provide the patient with

(A)political Buildings: Ideology, Memory and Warsaw's 'Old Town'

by G. Michał Murawski (King's College/Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge)

the means to truly forget the repressed material of which they were otherwise the victim' (Forty 1999: 5), then the PRL might be seen to have benefited from the 'transference' which characterised the relationship of a city of analysts to their healer – the communist party. The big flaw which impeded this transference in the eyes of the patients, however, was that the analyst was in the payroll of the very people who'd stood by as their city was destroyed.

Such a reading of the agentic role of architecture in blocking processes of forgetting can be complemented by another interpretation suggested by the work of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1997). Following Lacan, Žižek argues that in order for a hegemonic ideology to operate successfully, it must develop a set of 'quilting points', empty 'signifiers without signifieds' which allow a hegemonic position to be articulated by temporarily freezing the endlessly shifting process of signification under the banner of these voluminous and boundary-imposing, universalising, empty signifiers. However, it seems that the choice of the reconstruction of Warsaw's historic monuments as a 'quilting point' was ill-judged. Warsaw's wartime history and the role within it of forces allied to the PRL's leadership, was too invested with memories, had too many signifieds already attached to it, to either link the PRL with its desired historical predecessors, or to allow for the forgetting of traumatic, destabilising memories. The oppositionist technique was effectively to, as Žižek puts it, 'question the concrete existing universal order on behalf of its symptom, of the part which, although inherent to the existing universal order, has no 'proper place' within it.' (Žižek 1997: 49) It was easy for the opposition to bring the dialectical underside of the socialist-patriotic reconstruction of Warsaw to prominence, the memories which constituted it having been too powerful to be forgotten.

(A)Political Buildings: The Old Town after 1989

Since the fall of the PRL, there has been a strong tendency to argue for the normative 'separation' of architecture from ideology in Poland. The

discourse which pervades in the work of the contemporary commentators on Warsaw's architecture cited above, as well as in newspapers and everyday discussions in today's Poland, tends to adopt an attitude which 'condemns' the 'ideologisation' of the Old Town, as in the architectural historian Marta Lesniakowska's description of it as a 'pseudo-historical... urban nature reserve' (2004), an ideological obfuscation in the form of an open-air museum. The same commentators frequently advocate the 'de-ideologisation' or the 'de-mystification' of the Old Town and the wider built environment of the post-communist, late capitalist city. Following Louis Althusser's claim that 'one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology' (Althusser 1971: 118), it might be suggested that an apolitical attitude has become the most visible ideological manifestation in the architecture of liberal, capitalist societies. For David Harvey (1990) and Fredric Jameson (1991), such a 'postmodern' depoliticisation of culture is primarily a cultural, *ideological* symptom of the contemporary mode of capitalist economic organisation, 'flexible accumulation' in Harvey's term, and 'late capitalism' in Jameson's.

However, post-socialist, late capitalist Warsaw's reconstructed historic centre continues to occupy a fraught, uncertain position in Poland's political imagination. In fact, in a country reacting against the politicization of everyday life during the communist era, such an 'anti-ideological' attitude tends to be marked by an explicit anti-communist impulse, bringing its political content closer to the surface. Discussion of the rebuilding of Warsaw's historic buildings is often tense, and indeed tends to revolve around the question of whether or not the rebuilding process was anything more than a cynical communist propaganda exercise – this controversy is one of the many which divides the opinions of politicians, journalists, contributors to internet forums, residents, architects and urban planners.

In the course of a debate documented in the pages of one of Poland's daily newspapers, Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, a former centre-right Prime Minister of Poland and Mayor of Warsaw, supported a declaration by a member of his staff,

(A)political Buildings: Ideology, Memory and Warsaw's 'Old Town'

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Fig. 3 - A Bellotto block on Krakowskie Przedmieście, 2009.

which described the rebuilding of the city as a 'dread-inducing, controversial affair', carried out 'according to the dictates of the Soviet Union.' In reply, the left-wing politician Marek Borowski rejected the comments from Marcinkiewicz's camp as "idiotic", and called for a campaign to remind Poland's inhabitants of the period of 'spontaneous, nationwide enthusiasm and unity' which characterized the rebuilding of the capital city. (*Trybuna* 24 October 2006)

Since the early 1990s, the main left-wing grouping in Poland, the social democratic Left Alliance, many of whose members previously belonged to the communist party, has been discredited by its association with the PRL. However, after the left last lost its control over the government in 2005, it has struggled to gain more than 10% support in either elections or opinion polls. The only significant political choice in the last two general and presidential elections has been between a Catholic-nationalist Law and Justice

Party and the free-market liberal Civic Platform. Many on the left feel that a reconsideration of the legacy of the period of the PRL, starting with the restoration of Warsaw as one of its first major achievements, may contribute to a re-organisation in the field of political possibilities (or ideological quilting points) in contemporary Poland. Several people I have spoken to have expressed quite explicitly their feeling that the walls and stones of the Old Town still have the potential to exert a powerful, subversive political agency, as they are said to have done during the dying years of the PRL.

Warsaw's attitude towards its rebuilt centre, then, is anything but straightforward. The pale granite laid earlier this year on the surface of Krakowskie Przedmieście, one of the historic streets rebuilt after its depiction by Bellotto, was intended to make the street 'resonate closer', even more so than it already does, with its depictions on Bellotto's canvasses. To make this explicit, several glass blocks featuring images of Bellotto's paintings were installed along the street at places corresponding to the spot from which they would have been painted (*fig. 3*). The architect responsible for the street's 'revitalization', Krzysztof Domaradzki – by no means a figure identified with the political left – told me that he didn't *consciously* rely on any 'ideological motives' in his designs. However, he admitted that he *unconsciously* attempted to refer to the process of the post-war rebuilding of Warsaw.' Mirroring almost exactly the language of Zachwatowicz and other representatives of the Polish school of conservation, Domaradzki expressed support for many of the aesthetic interventions of the post-war period, which attempted to restore 'purity of form' to buildings like John's House, or to St John's Cathedral by freeing them of what he dismissed as 'nineteenth century imperfections'. Domaradzki referred to his use of Bellotto's paintings as a technique to conjure the 'atmosphere' of late-eighteenth century Warsaw, and added, 'unfortunately, I agree with Bolesław Bierut [the president of Poland during the Stalinist years] that the period of [Warsaw's eighteenth-century Enlightenment] was a period of greatness which it is correct to refer.' Further, Domaradzki went so far as to repeatedly declare, after

(A)political Buildings: Ideology, Memory and Warsaw's 'Old Town'

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Zachwatowicz, that he sees himself as a 'set designer', 'setting the stage' for everyday life by manipulating the urban landscape. (Domaradzki 2009) While Domaradzki's Krakowskie Przedmiescie has gained approval from residents and tourists, it has of course been condemned by Lesniakowska and other commentators as a regressive, 'neo-socialist realist' fantasy.

What I hope the above, brief observations suggest is that the web of relations between ideology and Warsaw's Old Town today has not yet been dismantled. In fact, it continues to be swarmed upon by the agencies of a set of actors which are diffuse, oblique, contradictory and inconsistent, as well as overlapping and intertwined – whether dead painters, economic transformations, politicians, the 'unruly force of memory', the buildings themselves – or any other entities whose contours can be discerned. While the economic, political and ideological landscapes have undergone a number of dramatic transformations, the past, present and future of Warsaw's 'new' Old Town – as well as its analysis – is still a discursive and material work in progress.

• **Michał Murawski** grew up in Warsaw and Norwich. He studied Social Anthropology and Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies and University College London, and completed an MPhil in Social Anthropological Research at the University of Cambridge. He is currently on fieldwork in Poland, gathering materials for a PhD dissertation on the relationship between architecture and ideology in Warsaw.

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