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Forgotten Terrain? Discussions of Urban Planning, Architecture and Remembrance in Warsaw after the Second World War as Exemplified by the ‘NonReconstruction’ of Theatre Square and Piłsudski Square

This project focuses on two representative squares at the heart of Warsaw, both of which were razed to the ground during the war: Theatre Square and Piłsudski Square. These squares had a highly representative character in the interwar period, as they were almost exclusively surrounded by public buildings (the Town Hall, Churches, the Grand Theatre, the Foreign Ministry in the Brühl Palace, the General Staff, and a bank). At the same time, a huge political symbolism attached to them given the many memorials located there, including the tomb of the unknown soldier. Moreover, some of the buildings on these squares were bitterly fought over during the war or deliberately destroyed prior to the retreat of German troops.

My research is guided by the question why these two adjacent squares – despite their central location and their significance in the interwar period – were hardly rebuilt at all after the war and remained wastelands, in some cases up to the present day. With the exception of the Grand Theatre, no buildings were reconstructed. Yet neither of the two squares fits the description of “forgotten terrain” (Zygmunt Stępiński), because the outward appearance of both reveals little about the intentions of those involved in planning what would become of them: politicians, urban planners, architects and monument conservators. Remarkably enough, most of the buildings were initially supposed to have been rebuilt. Furthermore, over a period of many decades numerous competitions were held and designs were proposed, some of which tied in with the plans to rebuild the squares in the interwar period.

In terms of their actual location and in a more figurative sense, the two squares seem to have been in a kind of inbetween space: between a vision of the architectural past (the

idealised old town in the north, resurrected as a residential quarter) and a vision of the urban future (the socialist city centre with the Palace of Culture and Constitution Square to the south). With their motley buildings, many of which had been destroyed, the squares were characterized above all by ambivalence and were thus difficult terrain for those concerned with urban planning and the politics of memory.

As centres of ‘nonreconstruction’, both squares are fruitful objects of study in an investigation of how various actors dealt with the tension between the loss that the destroyed buildings represented and the possibility of a new start inherent in the destruction of the old building stock in the period from 1945 to 1989. What structures are rebuilt? And above all (a question that has hardly been explored before now) what structures are not rebuilt, but left out and replaced with something new? In other words: what structures are defined by whom, how, when, and why, as buildings of historical importance (and what structures aren’t)? And how are the various positions in this regard – urban planning, pragmatic, political, ideological, and financial – aligned and negotiated? Which actors have the power to decide and based on which argument? By analysing the records of local and central planning authorities as well as contemporary media reports, I also wish to clarify to what extent public opinion represented an additional hindrance for state actors and whether and to what extent these discussions served as a forum for references to national categories.

Thus, in addition to providing new insights into urban and architectural history, the project aims to assess the longevity of national categories and urban structures that had developed over centuries.