

Cities of a new type. New industrial cities in popular democracies after 1945

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In May 2015, the city of Dunaújváros, located 70 km from Budapest, hosted an international conference with the participation of historians and art historians representing more than a dozen scientific communities from Europe. All of them interested in researching the cultural heritage at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, connected to the process of establishing cities and housing estates on the basis provided by local heavy industry. Polish findings in this area were presented by the author of the present article (*Visual Artists in Nowa Huta*), yet Polish, particularly Nowa Huta-related motifs, surfaced in a nearly all papers, which appears to confirm that the knowledge about the architecture and urban planning of Nowa Huta constitutes an important point of reference for the research into the so-called "new cities" in countries functioning as so-called people's democracies.

Before referring to the content-related side of the selected papers, I would like to dedicate a few words to the venue of the meeting, not coincidentally chosen by its initiator - Jérôme Bazin from the Université de Paris-Est. Dunaújváros is one those industrial cities that were built from scratch at the same time as Nowa Huta. Let us remember that investments of this type were not dictated merely by a healthy and rational economy, but primarily by political reasons. After the Korean conflict had broken out, the exacerbation of the Cold War served to reassure Communist leaders that greater emphasis on creating the defensive base of individual countries in the form of a powerful heavy industry was required. Hungary was to become precisely such a "country of steel and iron". Hence, the city of Sztálinváros (its original name) was first and foremost built for workers employed at the "Stalinvaros" Steelworks and in a massive local power plant. In terms of total area and population, the city was smaller than Nowa Huta, yet unlike the latter, it preserved its independence. The majority of public utility buildings were erected at the beginning of the 1950s, many of them have still preserved their original functions - such as Béla Bartók's (Theatre and) Art House, the cinema, the health centre, the city museum, the Works Community Centre, the shopping mall, and the kindergarten - without shedding the costume of socialist realism that was characteristic of that period. In recent years, the local authorities, having noticed the potential this heritage does possess, have set out to specifically preserve the external ornamentation of the edifices, including residential housing: bass-reliefs (e.g. *Allegory* by Gyenes Tamás on the primary school building hailing from 1954), mosaics (e.g. a 1953 cycle from Iván Szilárd, Hegyi György, Rác András, and Mattioni Eszter, located in the shopping mall and depicting the life of the city's builders, sgraffiti /e.g. by Jenő Medveczky on a facade of a block of flats) and metalworks (e.g. on balconies in blocks of flats), whereas socialist realism realisations feature prominently in the city's promotional materials and cultural publications.

Returning to unavoidable comparisons, it is fitting to state that within the same period a snowballing increase in residential needs and, consequently, the construction "dash" (fourteen residential estates had been erected by the end of 1958) resulted in issues related to the aestheticization of public spaces receding into the background. Prestigious public utility buildings surrounding Plac Centralny [Central Square] as well as administrative steelwork buildings had managed to don the garb of socialist realism, yet it was dominated by the language of monumental form, generally devoid of ornamentation and supplemented with minor spatial elements: low walls, metal grid- and latticework, as well as fences. Visual propaganda, so prominent in the case of facades and interiors of the Hungarian city, expressed in realistic representations, was realised in the form of inconspicuous outdoor sculptures (in the vicinity of day care centres and kindergartens) or neon lights and mobile artefacts: posters, paintings, mock-ups, occasional decorations, applied art designed for flats, e.g. textiles and ceramics. In principle, the construction works in Nowa Huta spanned the entire Communist period. In their greater majority, interesting interiors from this early period, e.g. the KMPiK [the International Press and Book Club] premises or the model commercial areas have been transformed. As a result, despite the recent intensified efforts aiming at preserving, describing, and rendering the cultural potential of this district more attractive, it is difficult to transform it, for example as it has been done in Dunaújváros, into a live open-air eco-museum of the heritage bequeathed to us by socialist realism. Its dispersed development also constitutes an obstacle, for the distances between more important buildings, sculptures, or cultural institutions are substantial, while in Dunaújváros the most valuable examples of socialist realism can be viewed during a walk of less than half an hour. Yet, Nowa Huta has its distinguishing feature - a fundamental trait, still legible despite the urban fabric increment of more than sixty years: a perfect spatial concept, based on the best models: regularly laid out wide lanes, squares, and interesting vistas.

Let us, however, return to the historical perspective - the main theme of the conference. Representatives of individual scientific circles presented the latest findings related to the circumstances of construction, architectural designs, as well as cultural life both in the industrial centres created before WWII, such as Magnitogorsk in the Ural, and investments considered to be twin: Dunaújváros, Nowa Huta and East German Eisenhüttenstadt, but also many other lesser known projects in the territory of former Czechoslovakia (Nová Dubnica), the USSR (Zelenograd), Yugoslavia (Velenje), and Bulgaria (Blagoevgrad). Particular attention was given to activities of design teams of individual cities and estates (e.g. the paper entitled *Nová Dubnica. The First Socialist City*, delivered by Lucia Almášiová and Viera Dlháňova). The findings were made on the basis of research in archives which, in majority, opened their doors after 1989. Some conference participants also pointed to the importance of sources of another type to which little attention has been paid yet, such as diaries, journals kept by workers' brigades from individual plants (Annamaria Nagy's paper *Brigade Diaries from Dunaferr*) and press, such as the *We Build Socialism [Budujemy Socjalizm]* newspaper, later continued as *The Voice of Nowa Huta [Głos Nowej Huty]* (the paper delivered by the author of the present article).

Today the temporal distance and the layer of scientific findings that has accumulated around this history allows us to read these *ad hoc* observations - jotted down mainly at one's workplace, but time spent at work decidedly dominated the remaining time - without the ideological baggage. It allows us to extract the facts and attempt to reconstruct the so-called mood of the era. One of such threads often surfacing from these sources are the fashionable, especially after 1956, visits from the allied people's democracy countries. The visits comprised local

activists, workers from individual plants, and sometimes even their families (travelling by the so-called "trains of friendship"). They were followed by journalists and photographers of local newspapers. In their accounts from the "brotherly countries" these tourists brought a surrogate of exoticism, a flavour of foreign lands. While preparing for the conference, I came across one of such reportages published in 1958 by *The Voice of Nowa Huta*. Its author, Tadeusz Czubała, a member of an eight person delegation, waxed poetic about the quality of life in the city of Sztálinváros, its infrastructure for young couples with children - leisure areas with amusement parks, and shopping outlets. He appreciated the level of services and commerce: "In Sztálinváros - I was most taken by the shops. It is fitting to start by saying that their shops, with goods and attractive commodities can be seen already ... in the street. Since, unlike in Poland, while building their new socialist city, Hungarians did not at all give up on shop windows and modernity (...). Another thing that came as a nice surprise were copious numbers of colourful neon lights, order, and cleanliness in the streets and beautiful, colourful, sturdy, and durable facades of buildings. You can see utmost care for the city's appearance, comfort of its residents, order and discipline in convenience facilities". These opinions were based on reality - while Nowa Huta continued to expand, many investments meant to improve the quality of the residents' life never took off the ground; elegant, but scarce shops offered rationed goods, deliveries were irregular, and commodities were sold from under the counter to a selected few.

In Hungary, after the political crisis and in the wake of reforms introduced after 1956, life was more prosperous. Licences to conduct private production and trade, obviously in limited scope, were granted, various areas of light industry were strengthened, workers' wages were higher than in Poland, and they could choose from a wider assortment of offered goods. A question could be posed whether today, when European countries, especially those within the European Union are becoming so similar to one another, if such comparisons still make sense. From the perspective of commerce and services, e.g. hotel services, it seems entirely pointless, yet an art historian is interested in something different altogether - an attitude to the cultural heritage in the context at hand, i.e. the period of history until recently considered to have been completely devoid of any value. Looking merely at the share of testimonies to crimes committed by the Communist regime next to relics of socialist realism and works of art in the advertising materials promoting the region and Budapest proper (the House of Terror Museum or the Memento Park), one may be under the impression that although Poland abounds in relics of this type, these possibilities have not been fully taken advantage of. Despite the political transformations in the wake of 1989, Hungarians were in no rush to relocate monuments of their Soviet comrades or those bearing a red star outside of their towns and cities, sometimes only commemorative plaques have been replaced to modify the sense of representations. I do not wish to engage here in assessment of such an approach, as it had been influenced by diverse conditions, however, it is difficult to liken it to many years of struggle for evicting Lenin's monument from Nowa Huta. What seems to be telling is that after it had finally been accomplished, during the last year's edition of the Artboom Festival, the site after the monument and the object itself, and - precisely speaking - its absence, turned out to have been the strongest point of reference for young artists. Taunting the motif, as Małgorzata Szydłowska and Bartosz Szydłowski did, in a way they assented to its return. Who knows? Perhaps somebody who has never experienced the bloody events on Aleja Róż, might as well attempt that. Fortunately, however, referring to the past in their projects, many young artists draw upon the work of historians.

<https://www.pol-int.org/en/conference/cities-new-type-new-industrial-cities-popular-democracies?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&cr=4786>