



PAULINA ŚWIĄTEK

(Biuro Stołecznego Konserwatora Zabytków, Warszawa)

## BUILDING ON THE RUINS: THE MURANÓW DISTRICT IN WARSAW

The post-war situation of the annihilated city created an unusual opportunity for those architects involved in the reconstruction of Warsaw. In the middle of 1945, according to various sources, there was from 20 to 25 million m<sup>3</sup> of rubble on the streets, of which over one million m<sup>3</sup> was in the area of the former ghetto<sup>1</sup>. The completely ruined terrain was covered by heaps of rubble lying up to four meters above street level. In this particular case however the reconstruction of the city was influenced by the specific context of the site, historical and economic factors, and the turning point of the adoption of the doctrine of socialist realism.

A crucial moment in the process of shaping the Jewish district in Warsaw is assumed to have been the regulation of 16<sup>th</sup> March 1809 which ordered Jewish inhabitants to abandon overpopu-

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Getter, *Straty ludzkie i materialne w powstaniu warszawskim* [*Casualties and destruction in the Warsaw Uprising*], (2004).

lated central city areas because of fire and epidemic risks<sup>2</sup>. The document defined the limits of the prohibited central areas however it did not impose specific sites for the new settlement. The so-called 'north district' (Dzielnica Północna) was developed over succeeding years. In 1921 this part of the city was inhabited by one-third of the Jewish population of Warsaw and during the inter-war period it was the area with the highest population density. Its specific character was given by its commercial function: the presence of many small workshops and retail sites. The architecture was dominated by dark, poorly ventilated tenement houses with windows facing one another and closed courtyards. The image of this part of Warsaw was negative and articles appeared in newspapers describing the district as a labyrinth of dirty, chaotic streets with numerous and disordered signboards. The 'north district' could not offer its inhabitants healthy, hygienic living conditions consistent with modern ideas, with access to fresh air, light and open spaces. A highly critical article appeared in 1925 in the Warsaw daily, "Kurier Warszawski", placing the 'north district' among the most ugly sites in the city, emphasizing the inclination of its inhabitants for eclectic forms of architecture and comparing the image of the buildings with a diseased body<sup>3</sup>. The image of the district was directly connected with the way its inhabitants were perceived: culturally alienated, closed in their own circle.

The main factor in the creation precisely here of the closed area of the Warsaw Ghetto by the Nazis in October 1940, was the large number of Jewish inhabitants. Space was gradually reduced and ultimately destroyed in April 1943 after the Warsaw Ghetto

<sup>2</sup> B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *Getto warszawskie – przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście* [*The Warsaw Ghetto: a Guide to the Perished City*], (2001), p. 766.

<sup>3</sup> *Dzielnica tandetnych kamienic* [A district of decrepit tenement houses], "Kurier Warszawski", 101–103 (1925), p. 17.

Uprising. The planned demolition of the area to follow signified not only the physical destruction of the buildings but also the will to erase the memory of a community – a calculated act of cultural annihilation<sup>4</sup>. The buildings of a total volume of 12 million cubic meters were to a large extent demolished and burned. In addition to the area, the physical substance, the population was exterminated.

In the first years of post-war reconstruction one of the most frequently touched on questions was the rubble lingering on the streets. Ruin in cultural space – a traditional emblem of the passing of time – exposes the mechanisms of imagination and memory. A ruin is something that does not exist yet at the same time can commemorate a pre-existing form. The ambivalent ontological status of a ruin depends on its double meaning of creation and destruction. A ruin, a new totality, is simultaneously a fragment of the preceding form and this fragmentation accents its physical and anthropomorphic character<sup>5</sup>. In testimonies from the ruined territory of the former ghetto we can find descriptions comparing the image of an area covered in red brick, with an organic metaphor of blood. Following Susan Sontag, a destroyed city can still be a landscape which we can find beautiful and fascinating, but on the other hand although a city landscape is not a human body, images of destroyed buildings are almost as meaningful as a corpse lying in the street<sup>6</sup>.

What to do with the rubble was one of the most commonly repeated questions in the first years of the reconstruction of

---

<sup>4</sup> The aspect of war destruction is analysed by R. Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory. Architecture at War*, (2007).

<sup>5</sup> G. Królikiewicz, *Ruina. Horyzont znaczeń [Ruins: a variety of meanings]*, in: *Terytorium ruin. Ruina jako obraz i temat romantyczny*, (1993), pp. 9–17.

<sup>6</sup> S. Sontag, *Widok cudzego cierpienia [Regarding the pain of others]*, (2010), p. 14.

Warsaw. In the consciousness of the people, the rubble on the streets was slowing down the process of returning to regular city life. The space needed to be organized and the rubble removed but at the same time, from an economic point of view, the materials should have been reused, especially in the post-war era of crisis. Numerous articles published information on progress in the development of methods for the use of those materials in the process of reconstruction. In 1945 a special commission was created for the reuse of the demolition materials. It was assumed that the various materials could be reused in the building process: bricks, tiles, beams, ceramic plates, steps, lining materials, paving stones<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, architects were fascinated by the possibilities given by the rubble remaining and to make use of it to landscape an interesting artistic effect. In 1945, in the Warsaw weekly “Skarpa Warszawska”, an article by Maciej Nowicki appeared presenting his study for a downtown district to be placed on terraces at various levels with a functional separation of traffic and pedestrians<sup>8</sup>. One of the problems to be solved was how to construct foundations on a rubble base. In 1946 the Warsaw Reconstruction Office (Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy) created a guideline for the clearing of rubble which was given an ideological dimension. At an exhibition presenting its achievements in the first months of its activity posters were presented showing success in removing it. Experimental projects for its use were brought into effect, for example in 1947 in the “Warta” building where the use

---

<sup>7</sup> Archiwum Państwowe m. st. Warszawy [State Archive of the Capital City of Warsaw] (further: APW), Archiwum Sigalina [Sigalins Archive] (further: AJS), Sign. 65 (Sprawozdanie z prac komisji do opracowania sposobu wykorzystania materiałów z rozbiórek [Report from the works of the commission for the reuse of demolition materials]).

<sup>8</sup> *Praca architektoniczna – śródmieście Warszawy* [Architectural research – Warsaw downtown], “Skarpa Warszawska”, 2 (1945), pp. 3–4.

of prefabricated bricks made from rubble on the elevations of the building created an interesting textural and coloristic effect.

On the area of the former ghetto the problem had a specific meaning when taking into consideration the extent of destruction and the context of the site. To quote sociologist Stanisław Ossowski, the pre-war buildings had become somehow a resource for the future city<sup>9</sup>. Józef Sigalin, one of the directors of the Warsaw Reconstruction Office, in his cataloguing of the condition of the areas, described unimaginable destruction in the former ghetto and his fears of possible mistakes in defining the space and places because, as he has written, the image of pre-war Muranów had already been erased from memory<sup>10</sup>. The author described a place lacking its identity but with a necessity to define the site. Reconstruction of the buildings was out of the question, as Ossowski has written, in the new reality no commemoration of the ghetto other than a monument dedicated to its heroes was possible. As a matter of fact, in 1948 the Ghetto Heroes Memorial was erected, at that time a structure emerging from the ruins.

This most destroyed area of the city simultaneously gave architects many opportunities. Before deciding the design of the area, it was essential to specify the function of the site within the new Warsaw. The location of this space in the downtown was crucial in its important role in creating the image of the future city. The urban planners were considering a commercial or recreational function for the district, and one idea was to create a large park. Finally, a design for a housing estate was accepted, as

---

<sup>9</sup> S. Ossowski, *Odbudowa Stolicy w świetle zagadnień społecznych* [The reconstruction of Warsaw in the light of social issues], in: *Pamięć warszawskiej odbudowy 1945–1949*, ed. by J. Górski, (1972).

<sup>10</sup> J. Sigalin, *Z archiwum architekta* [From the architects' archive], 1 (1986), p. 94.

the need for housing was one of the biggest problems in the post-war city. Muranów was to be a residential district of specific character, planned for young people working in the city centre and it was taken into account that, in the future, the inhabitants would migrate to districts situated further away. Because of the necessity to concentrate a large number of people on a relatively small area, it was planned to construct six-storey buildings which would enable the provision of green areas in the spaces between buildings. Their arrangement also enabled the principle of lowering the building density to be achieved and the living space of the future housing estate was to be in contrast to its pre-war image. The design for the district by Waław Kłyszewski, Jerzy Mokrzyński and Eugeniusz Wierzbicki (the architects of the future party headquarters) was presented in the first issue of the magazine “Architektura” in 1947<sup>11</sup>. They planned it functionally divided into nine units, which were only partly based on the former street layout and referred more to modern pre-war ideas of housing estates consisting of scattered buildings surrounded by open areas. Yet, the final project was entrusted to Bohdan Lachert, one of the main participants of the pre-war circle of the architectural avant-garde. From 1926 to 1939 he had collaborated with Józef Szanajca and was a member of the “Praesens” group. In post-war Warsaw, like many other architects of his generation, he had to face the unusual reality of reconstruction which gave a chance to develop space on a large scale. In practice, it meant also the necessity of redefining artistic attitudes and the status of an architect at the moment of the ‘crystallizing’ of a new political system. In an interview from 1946 for the daily “Kurier Codzienny” Lachert presented his ideas on the main issues of reconstruction. He

---

<sup>11</sup> *Muranów – dzielnica mieszkaniowa* [Muranów – housing estate], “Architektura”, 1 (1947), pp. 8–11.

emphasized the chance to create a new, modern appearance for a dynamic city of the future, with a highly developed transportation system. He postulated the organization of different functional areas encircled by green zones. The Warsaw of the future was to be a city of skyscrapers and intersections. In his vision of the rebuilt city, historic areas were isolated complexes which did not limit development. Lachert presented the idea, common in his circle, that the architecture from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had no historic or artistic value. He suggested architectural expression through the exposure of the materials used and the construction process. Architectural decoration was to be replaced with exposed brickwork, concrete and the system of construction<sup>12</sup>. Lachert was also fascinated by the image of the newly erected Ghetto Heroes Memorial that contrasted with the ruins of the district. In September 1948, in an interview for the periodical “Głos Plastyków”, he presented the idea not to remove the rubble but to use it as a base for the newly erected city<sup>13</sup>. The new reality arising from the ruins could not come into being in isolation from the material traces of the past. The rubble, being left on the site, would become a spatial sign of memory for the ghetto’s tragedy.

The costs of removing the rubble were too high and this turned out in fact to be the main argument for the use of terraces and slopes. The possibility to create a space that differed from the downtown landscape was fascinating as well as inspirational for the architect. What is more, the rubble was to be used as material for prefabricated blocks. It seems that economic factors were not the only reason for using the rubble in the process of construction.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Najpilniejsze zagadnienia odbudowy* [The most urgent reconstruction issues], “Kurier Codzienny”, 86 (1946), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> J. Górski, *Warszawa w latach 1944–49. Odbudowa* [Warsaw in 1944–49. Reconstruction], (1988), pp. 422–423.

In the project the main accent of artistic expression was to be the exposed features of the used material. Not using plaster on the elevations exposed their redness and the austere surface of the bricks was to be used on the building site in the process of making the blocks. The symbolic character of the housing estate commemorating its traumatic history was emphasized by the light red, rough surface of the walls. In December 1948 the project for the reconstruction of Muranów on rubble terraces was accepted with the economic aspect of the high cost of clearing the area brought to the fore. The amount of rubble in the area was set against an image of Warsaw's greatest skyscraper, built in the 1930s, as a headquarters for Prudential Insurance. Thus a double opportunity for using the rubble was propagated. The new project by Bohdan Lachert for a housing estate was based on a complex of buildings built on two meter rubble terraces with slopes leading to the street still visible today. The neighbourhood unit consisted of houses, schools and kindergartens. Green areas encircled three types of multi-family houses: a three-storey cubic form with a central staircase, a 'gallery' building with entrances to the apartments from outside galleries and a long four-storey building with a number of staircases. In an article published in May 1949, just before the National Conference of Party Architects in June (thus before the official acceptance of the doctrine of socialist realism), Lachert emphasized the archetypal dimension to his project in commemorating the former district. In his expressive description of the housing estate he compared it to the mythical Phoenix reborn from its own ashes. When writing about the rubble terraces, he mentioned the metaphor of the excavation of Troy. Rubble – the only connection with the past – was used as a spatial monument with the function of commemoration. In this context, the rubble terraces can be interpreted as a pedestal – an important part of the monument mediating between the actual site and



a representational sign<sup>14</sup>. The presented idea was expressed by means of the suggestive colour and rough form of the non-plastered elevations symbolizing – as defined by one of the builders of Muranów – ‘the blood of the destroyed city’<sup>15</sup>. Construction began in 1949, yet it soon turned out that the housing estate did not meet with the authorities’ expectations. According to the doctrine of socialist realism, the reconstructed city had to have an ideological expression and architecture without such detail presented ideas contrary to the new requirements. At the beginning of construction, the only accented ideological aspect was the rapid and technologically advanced building process as publicized in systematic reports from the building site in the weekly “Stolica”. The first housing estate using Soviet technology was evidence of the modernity of the state. In the Six-Year Plan for the reconstruction of Warsaw, a comparison of the planned image of the district was published alongside a drawing illustrating the more ‘representative’ architectural forms in the ‘improved’ project. The visualization presented a monumental fountain, balustrades on the terraces and buildings completed by large cornices. Yet, the elevations were still to be un-plastered. The ‘improvements’ to the project consisted in applying detail: rustication, cornices, columns and geometrical sgraffito. Lachert, in his self-criticism report in February 1950, announced that the image of the housing estate did not meet coloristic and material expectations. He presented new aims for the estate: to integrate the area with the city and to include more such ‘representative’ forms<sup>16</sup>. Owing to the creation of an entrance to Muranów with a terrace and steps that repeated

---

<sup>14</sup> The role of pedestal in the semantic meaning of traditional sculpture is analysed by R. Krauss, *Sculpture in expanded field*, “October”, 8 (1979), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> B. Lachert, *Muranów – dzielnica mieszkaniowa [Muranów – housing estate]*, “Architektura”, 5 (1949), pp. 129–137.

<sup>16</sup> B. Lachert, *Muranów – wielkie piękne zadanie [Muranów: a great and*

the neo-classical forms of the lower part of the Mostowski Palace, the project was to be more axial. In the lower part of the terrace a cinema and restaurant were planned, and a series of axes and viewpoints were created. The main axis consisted of the entrance to the estate under a monumental arcade while another was created perpendicularly ending in a focal point on the facade of the former Działyński palace. In 1950 the National Committee for the Reconstruction of Warsaw (NROW) decided that the elevations of the buildings should be covered with the light plaster typical of Warsaw<sup>17</sup>. In theory, the process was to solve the problem of heating the buildings, but in reality, above all, it eliminated the monotonous and depressing image presented by the architecture. The Muranów housing estate was to be colourful. It appears that the architect wanted to keep, even to a minimal degree, the effect of emphasizing the features of the material and in 1951 he insisted on not using smooth plaster<sup>18</sup>. A conflict between the architect and the authorities appeared again in 1953 when Lachert argued with Józef Sigalin about the planned sgraffito inscription 'Muranów' on a cartouche above the entrance to the area<sup>19</sup>. According to Sigalin such an inscription would unnecessarily emphasize the separateness of the district. This conflict is interesting,

---

*beautiful task*], Biblioteka Muzeum Architektury we Wrocławiu, Zbiór rękopisów i maszynopisów dotyczących Muranowa.

<sup>17</sup> APW, AJS, Sign. 217 (Protokół z posiedzenia Prezydium Naczelnej Rady Odbudowy Warszawy [Report from the session of the National Committee of the Reconstruction of Warsaw]).

<sup>18</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych [The Central Archives of Modern Records], Sign. 201 (Ministerstwo Budownictwa Miast i Osiedli, Budowa Osiedla Muranów, protokoły, plan robót, korespondencja [Department of Urban Planning, reports, plans of works, correspondence]).

<sup>19</sup> APW, Sign. 38 (Naczelny Architekt m. st. Warszawy, Muranów – korespondencja [The main architect of the City of Warsaw, Muranów – correspondence]).

especially having in mind Sigalin's earlier descriptions of the destroyed area and his doubts about defining the site of the former ghetto. Any specific area in the new reality must be integrated with the rest of the city. In the last stage the idea of building on rubble terraces was abandoned, explained by technical difficulties and experience on the building site. The last work on the decoration of the elevations was finished in 1955.

In analysing this example of the post-war urbanization of an area of the destroyed ghetto, we are confronted with the issue of the architecture of a city as a component of collective memory, exposed to the process of erasure. The post-war reality of a new beginning on a site of trauma gave an opportunity to create a space contrasting with the image of the pre-war 'north district'. The economy, historical factors and the artistic potential of the area had an influence on the idea of building on and out of the ruins of the destroyed district. The projects right from the beginning assumed the creation of a new space, different from the structure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century city so criticized by town planners. One of the main aims of the reconstruction was to connect this alienated area to the city which in pre-war times had been detached by an invisible boundary, and during the war separated by a real wall. In the original project, the 'district-monument' had a function as the commemoration of wartime trauma. The main element, a spatial monument located on a rubble pedestal, was to be the non-plastered, austere surface of walls symbolizing 'the blood of the destroyed city'. The final shape of the newly built district was influenced by a specific compromise between the architect and the authorities, legitimizing both what could be commemorated and how. Denial of the traumatic episodes and the erasing of memory in the 'north district' were to be accomplished by the creation of a completely new reality.

## BUDOWANIE NA GRUZACH: WARSZAWSKA DZIELNICA MURANÓW

(STRESZCZENIE)

Po wojnie architekci i urbaniści Stolicy zetknęli się z rzeczywistością unicestwionego miasta, dającą niemalże nieograniczone możliwości kreacji nowej przestrzeni. W artykule przedstawiono szczególny przykład odbudowy po zniszczeniach wojennych – budowę w latach 1949–1956 południowej części warszawskiego osiedla Muranów. Teren tzw. Dzielnicy Północnej, w czasie wojny getto, został niemalże całkowicie zniszczony w akcie sukcesywnego, zaplanowanego burzenia zabudowy. Zrujnowany obszar pokrywały zwały gruzu sięgające czterech metrów powyżej poziomu ulicy. Problemy z zalegającym gruzem oraz pomysły na zużytkowanie materiałów rozbiórkowych były najczęściej poruszonymi kwestiami w pierwszym okresie odbudowy. Wprowadzono eksperymentalne metody odzyskiwania budulca w celu wykorzystywania go do ukształtowania terenu lub też do budowy. Na terenie po dawnym getcie problem ten zyskiwał dodatkowo wymiar symboliczny. W pierwotnym projekcie Bohdana Lacheta Muranów miał stać się dzielnicą-pomnikiem, upamiętniającym traumę wojennych wydarzeń. Głównym elementem wyrazu przestrzennego tego monumentu, wyniesionego ponad poziom miasta poprzez cokół gruzowego usypiska, miała być wyeksponowana, nietynkowana, surowa powierzchnia elewacji symbolizujących „krew zniszczonego miasta”. O ostatecznym kształcie nowo wybudowanej dzielnicy zdecydował kompromis między architektem a władzą, która dążyła do ujednoczenia kształtu architektonicznego miasta. Korekta pierwotnego projektu po przyjęciu doktry-

ny realizmu socjalistycznego polegała przede wszystkim na nadaniu przestrzeni modernistycznego osiedla bardziej osiowego charakteru, wprowadzeniu na elewacje tynków oraz detalu architektonicznego aplikowanego na proste fasady budynków.

Opracowane przez Autorkę / Prepared by the Author

## DAS BAUEN AUF RUINEN: DER STADTTEIL MURANÓW IN WARSCHAU

(ZUSAMMENFASSUNG)

Nach dem Krieg haben sich die Architekten und Stadtplaner mit der Wirklichkeit der vernichteten Stadt auseinandergesetzt, die die Schöpfung eines völlig neuen Raumes fast unbegrenzt ermöglichte. Im Beitrag wurde ein besonderes Beispiel des Wiederaufbaus nach den Kriegszerstörungen vorgestellt – der Bau in den Jahren 1949–1956 des südlichen Teils der Wohnungssiedlung Muranów. Das Gebiet des sogenannten nördlichen Viertel, im Krieg das Ghetto, wurde fast völlig während des kontinuierlich geplanten Abrisses zerstört. Das ruinierte Gelände war durch Massen von Schutt bis zu vier Meter hoch über den Straßen bedeckt. Die Probleme mit den Trümmern und Ideen für die Verwendung der Abbruchmaterialien waren öfter Thematik in der ersten Periode des Wiederaufbaus. Es wurden neue Verfahren eingeführt für die Wiederverwendung der Baumaterialien. Auf dem Gebiet des Ghettos hat das Problem zusätzlich eine symbolische Dimension bekommen. Im ursprünglichen Projekt von Bohdan Lachet sollte Muranów ein Mahnmal-Viertel werden, welches das Trauma der Kriegsergebnisse unvergesslich macht. Das Hauptelement des räumlichen Aussehens des Monuments, das über den Stadtspiegel durch die „Postament“ aus den Trümmern entstand, sollten die hervorgehobenen, unverputzten, kargen Fassaden sein, die „das Blut der zerstörten Stadt“ symbolisieren. Über die endgültige Form des neugebauten Stadtteils wurde ein Kompromiss zwischen dem Architekt und der Staatsherrschaft, die eine Vereinheitlichung der architektonischen Stadtgestalt anstrebte, geschlossen. Die

Korrekturen des ursprünglichen Entwurfs nach der Annahme des Doktrin des Sozialistischen Realismus haben dem Viertel vor allem mehr Achsencharakter gegeben. Es wurde Putz auf den Fassaden und architektonische Details an einfachen Fassaden der Gebäude angebracht.

Tłumaczenie / Übersetzt von  
Renata Skowrońska und Simone Hasselmann



Ill. 1. Warta building, Ordynacka 14 Street, exposed rubble brick, ph. Paulina Świątek (2011)





Ill. 2. Main entrance to the Muranów Housing estate, ph. Paulina Świątek (2009)



Ill. 3. Gallery building on the Muranów housing estate, ph. Paulina Świątek (2009)



Ill. 4. Three-storey cubic building with a central staircase, ph. Paulina Świątek (2009)



Ill. 5. Four-storey building with a number of staircases, ph. Paulina Świątek (2009)



Ill. 6. Sgraffito decorations and details of the balconies, ph. Paulina Świątek (2011)



Ill. 7. Muranów housing estate – building with uncovered parts exposing rubble elements, ph. Paulina Świątek (2011)



Ill. 8. Various levels of the rubble terraces on the Muranów housing estate, ph. Paulina Świątek (2009)

