

## THE RECONSTRUCTION OF WARSAW OLD TOWN, POLAND

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TOWARDS the end of 1959, I was privileged to attend two International Congresses in Warsaw on the subject of Preservation of Historic Buildings in relation to Urban Redevelopment. One of these was organised by the Society of Polish Architects, and the other by the Polish Academy of Sciences. These Congresses provided an excellent opportunity to see how the Polish people were dealing with the preservation and restoration of their historic buildings especially as there was included an excursion to other cities in Poland, such as Torun, Poznan and Gdansk. After leaving Warsaw, I spent a further week in the south of Poland, centred at Krakow, before returning home via Prague.

It is difficult for us in this country to understand and realise the extent of the devastation caused by the last war in cities such as Warsaw and Gdansk. I think it is true to say that no country in Europe suffered so great a devastation of their buildings.<sup>1</sup> This was combined with tremendous losses in population, the destruction of the cultural heritage and great economic impoverishment. Whole cities, including their oldest quarters, frequently notable for their significance in the history of Poland, and for the charm of their architectural style, were razed to the ground. A great number of churches, castles, palaces and lesser houses representing priceless historic treasures in the history of the country, were deliberately blasted and burned. With this also went innumerable works of art, archives, libraries and collections of all kinds.

The object of this paper is not to give a critical review of what has been achieved since the war, but rather to present the facts concerning the rebuilding of Warsaw Old Town, which in its entirety is now almost complete. I also wish to record the tremendous effort undertaken by the entire Polish nation during the past fourteen years, not only in re-shaping and expanding its national economy, but also in conserving and reconstructing the Old Town quarter in a number of cities, in a

<sup>1</sup> Poland lost almost 40 per cent. of all its national property and a sixth of its population.

manner and with a quality of workmanship which it would be difficult to surpass.

Before the complex and difficult task of rebuilding on the scale required for this project could be set going, special methods both in town planning and conservation had to be worked out. For example, it was most important to get a clear view as to the purpose and role that a given section of the city was intended to play in the life of the entire city. This necessitated drawing up principles of conservation based on scholarly investigation, not only with regard to individual buildings, but also to the section itself as a unit.

Work started in Warsaw Old Town as soon as the war was over, and the target included adjoining important historic and architectural buildings. The majority of these buildings have now been completely restored and reoccupied. The whole project is now nearing completion.

In order to re-create the atmosphere in which Polish architects and town planners set about their task, it is necessary to dwell a little on the history of Warsaw Old Town, on the part it played in the development of the whole city, on its state and appearance before the war, and on the extent of war damage. The extensive investigation of the Old Town area before and during the reconstruction, brought to light a wealth of new material which has now been published in several specialised books and articles.<sup>1</sup>

On a plan of contemporary Warsaw, it is quite easy to trace the small and typically medieval area, with its central rectangular Market Place, encircled by the remains of fortified walls. This is the most ancient district of Warsaw, and has been known through the ages as the Old Town. Archaeological research has brought to light the existence of an older settlement dating from the 10th and 11th centuries, which has undoubtedly given way to the medieval Old Town to be finally swallowed up with the modern Warsaw. The Old Town is on the west or left bank of the River Vistula, and is about 100 feet above river level. The site was thus bordered on the east by the steep Vistula bank; on the north by a deep ravine descending sharply towards the river, and on the south by a small valley in which a later royal castle was built. The area however, lacked natural protection on the west side, and fortifications were accordingly first built on this side, and later extended around the whole town.

It is difficult to find a definite date for the foundation of Warsaw, but several indications point to around 1285 A.D. Many and diverse factors contributed to the founding of the city. Chiefly, however,

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Zachwatowicz, J., and Bieganski, P. *The Old Town of Warsaw*. Warsaw, 1956.

the expanding economic development of the country to the east, called for new transport routes in areas most suitable for the crossing of the Vistula. Soon it became necessary to establish an administrative centre for the region and this developed into a new town. At the end of the 16th century, the charter of the City of Warsaw was altered to provide for its being the capital of the whole country instead of a local centre.

The rectangular Market Place and network of streets on a grid pattern in line with the Market Place, remains to-day as the basic pattern of the Old Town. The area within the fortified walls is somewhat less than 20 acres, and the Market Place itself is only 100 yards long by 70 yards wide.

A study of the Old Town by T. Zagrodski made it clear that the plan was set out according to a common denominator and that certain standard geometrical and mathematical proportions were used. These various factors delineated with great accuracy the street pattern, proportions for buildings both in plan and elevation. The standard unit was the rod<sup>1</sup> and the proportions were such simple units as 2:3, 4:7 and 9:12.

In the main streets and in the square, the houses were generally two rooms wide or 20 to 45 feet frontage, and a depth of somewhere around 60 to 70 feet. The front of the house consisted of one room or hall and room, and the staircase to the upper storey was situated at the far end of the building. The hall was generally planned on the right-hand side of the medieval house. All such houses had vaulted cellars, to which access was either from the hall or else direct from the street or near courtyard. The vaulted cellars usually represented an undivided space under a group of buildings, irrespective of the planning of the rooms above. Judging by the remains of the Gothic walls, most houses were of two storeys, and occasionally three.

Archaeological research and excavations have ascertained that the original fortifications consisted of a single earthen rampart with moat. The mid 14th century saw the erection of fortified walls to replace the rampart, and soon the Old Town was encircled with a wall the height of which was about 25 feet and had many towers and gates. A second line of fortifications was built in the 15th century, and in the 16th century a barbican was added to the main gate. A large part of these fortifications, buried later in the general building of the town, have survived and have been conserved.

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that this is the same standard unit used in England and related to the "bay".



PLATE I. Part of the City of Warsaw in 1945 showing the extent of destruction (page 27).



PLATE 2. The eastern entrance to the tunnel under the Old Town on the new east-west highway (page 30).

The ecclesiastical buildings of the Old Town comprised two medieval churches both of 14th-century date. The Town Hall was the principal municipal building, containing four halls and a northern tower. It stood on the southern side of the Market Place, but no details, however, exist concerning its appearance, as the latest drawings depicting the Old Town date from the 16th century. By this time the Town Hall had been converted into a greatly enlarged Renaissance building.

At the close of the 16th century, and throughout the 17th century, the areas lying around the fortified walls of the Old Town attracted new settlers and this caused the laying out of new streets and the erection of palatial residences and many smaller town houses.

The rise of Warsaw to the status of a capital city necessitated further changes in the Old Town. Some of the houses had by this date already been converted into Renaissance residences of the city burgers and merchants. The entire architectural transformation of the medieval character, however, occurred in the 17th century when the great fire of 1607 made necessary considerable rebuilding. The most noticeable change was in the roof line of the buildings, and a completely new architectural outline was created. Elevations became adorned with elaborate stone doorways, stone framed windows and decorated attics. This transformation continued right into the 18th century when many buildings were remodelled in the Rococo or early Classicist styles, and street frontages were closely built up.

The diminished role of the Old Town became quite manifest in the early 19th century, and in 1817 the Town Hall was pulled down, and the city administration, which had always remained in the Old Town, was moved outside. Throughout the 19th century, the Old Town remained the district where the less prosperous part of the population, chiefly artisans and the lower middle class lived.

In 1910 the Polish Society for the Protection of Historic Buildings purchased a house in the Market Place of the Old Town, and there established its headquarters. Architects, painters and poets came to live in the Old Town, and in the period between the two World Wars, the number of cultural and scientific societies quartered there steadily increased. In the period of the 1930's, suitable re-decoration of buildings was carried out as well as general reconstruction work. In short the Old Town became an object of national interest, and a fine example of careful conservation work.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Professor Jan Zachwatowicz and Ing. Arch. Andrzej Gruszecki for providing most of this historical material.

In the siege of Warsaw in September, 1939, the Old Town suffered comparatively little damage, but after the fall of the city, the Germans continued their work of destruction on an ever increasing scale, first stripping surviving buildings of all valuables and then demolishing them. However, it was the German fury after the insurrection in 1944 which caused complete destruction of the Old Town, as it was one of the main bulwarks of the resistance. After clearing the area of its population at the end of the insurrection, the Germans set about blowing up all the buildings, or fragments of buildings which were still standing, and the whole area was reduced to a pile of rubble. (Plate 1). It is difficult to realise that the extent of the destruction in Warsaw comprised 85 per cent. of the area of the whole city.

Immediately after the liberation in January, 1945, and after the Government had taken the decision to rebuild the city as the capital of the country, a special bureau for the restoration of Warsaw was established. From the very beginning the bureau was assisted in its work by the Department of Historic Architecture, which undertook the difficult task of protecting and reconstructing the historic buildings. Work on the protection of surviving historic buildings started in March, 1945, and the authorities as well as the population at large, were unanimous in their desire to rebuild the Old Town to its original appearance. The problem of reconstructing this entire area, the greater part of which had to be reconstituted, was sufficient to have defeated people less determined. The tremendous task is without precedent in history and has gone far beyond, generally speaking, the known principles of conservation.

A detailed investigation of the ruins led architects and conservators to conclude that, apart from the few surviving facades, there was a reasonable chance that many ground floors, halls and vaults, buried under the rubble could be relatively easily repaired. Moreover, the possibility of using existing roads and underground services was an important economic factor in favour of the reconstruction. Lastly, town planners maintained that it seemed desirable to rebuild the Old Town as a residential quarter, and such indeed was the function allotted to it in the master plan of the city. It remained only to decide upon the style of reconstruction, and to solve the problem of adapting the Old Town to modern housing conditions. What was wanted in fact was a workable solution both to the problems of town planning and the preservation of historic buildings. Such a solution demanded years of investigation.

Beginning in 1945, the Old Town became a great research centre



Part of the Market Square in the Old Town showing the very fine quality of the craftsmanship (page 32).



The west side of the Market Square in Warsaw Old Town (page 32).



where investigators started to compile a full record of anything that remained. Archaeological research conducted by means of excavation and drilling, unearched further evidence concerning the first settlement in the Old Town. Information came to light concerning its buildings, fortifications and culture. Hitherto unknown details, forms of construction and ornamentation rewarded the efforts of the investigators, and evidence collected on the site was supported by sets of documents collected from sources all over the world. The result of this was a fine record comprising original prints, paintings and drawings supplemented by 19th- and 20th-century photographs. Invaluable in this project was the material collected by the Institute of Polish Architecture. In the years between 1923 and 1939 it had organised, as part of its training programme for students, detailed studies of most of the historic building in the Old Town. The Institute was burned down in 1944, but the documents were smuggled out of Warsaw prior to the destruction. These drawings, which consisted of plans, sections, elevations and details formed the basic technical data for the Old Town reconstruction. Every possible source of information was used, and amongst these were the paintings of Canaletto, which he carried out in Warsaw between the years of 1767 and 1779.<sup>1</sup>

As the research work progressed, it became possible to work out a definite scheme for conservation work. This was to retain the most important historic elements in the Old Town—each building was classified as regards its historical merits—the guiding principal being the reconstruction of the most important buildings and, if necessary, for town planning reasons, to abandon the less valuable.

The greatest difficulty arose with the planning of housing accommodation. The closely built-up streets of the Old Town and the planning of the houses themselves defied in many respects, the standards of modern housing. A compromise had to be worked out, both in the departure from modern standards and also from absolute fidelity of reconstruction. Only authentic and historically important buildings were restored to their precise original form. Portions of later origin especially 19th-century additions were omitted from the reconstructed plan. This decision very considerably eased the street line.

The problem of flats in the narrow streets was solved by means of a scheme to provide commercial accommodation. A number of shops, coffee houses, bars and restaurants have been provided on the ground floor and in the vaulted cellars of the buildings, flats being

<sup>1</sup> Mieczyslaw Wallis. *Canaletto Malarz*. Warsaw, 1959.

placed on the upper floors only. This has not only provided pleasant facilities for the tourists who visit the Old Town, but has avoided having flats with inadequate lighting on the lower floors. Other services provided are a post office, a tourist bureau and headquarters for cultural and scientific societies. The whole of the north side of the Market Place has been set aside for the Warsaw History Museum, the Historical Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Society for the Historians of Art. In all cases the reconstructed buildings have been well equipped with the latest technical and sanitary installations, including central heating on a district basis. The population of the Old Town now totals some 5,000 people while in the 18th century it was 4,000. Of the total area of the Old Town approximately a fifth is occupied by roads and squares.

In 1945 when the first reconstruction efforts were made, work was begun on the protection of the burnt-out houses. Enormous areas of scaffolding and supports were erected to hold up the more valuable buildings. By 1948 most of the rubble in the Old Town had been removed and the temporary scaffolding for all buildings had been carried out. A six-year plan was inaugurated by the newly-formed bureau supervised by the Conservator's Office for the City of Warsaw.

The reconstruction of the Old Town was greatly helped by the construction of the East-West Highway, running in part under the Old Town. In order that the Old Town should be undisturbed, this highway was placed in a tunnel (Plate 2) which by its very conception has greatly enlivened this part of the city. By 1951 the first inhabitants moved into the Old Town.

By 1952 plans were ready for the entire reconstruction of the Market Place and certain streets around. In the fantastically short space of one year, all buildings planned in this area were completed, including technical equipment, interior decoration and exterior embellishments. All shops, restaurants and other services, designed for the area were finished to the last detail and open to the public in July, 1953. Pavements and roads were repaired and a new system of street lighting installed, which included bi-forked lamp-posts in the Market Place and for the rest, lanterns resting on wrought-iron supports set on the facades of buildings. All surviving architectural details such as doorways, wall paintings and ironwork were carefully conserved or restored. Many details had to be executed anew, either based on existing drawings and photographs or specially designed. The decoration of the facades in the Old Town proved an important and difficult problem. Its main role was to enliven the architecture, to

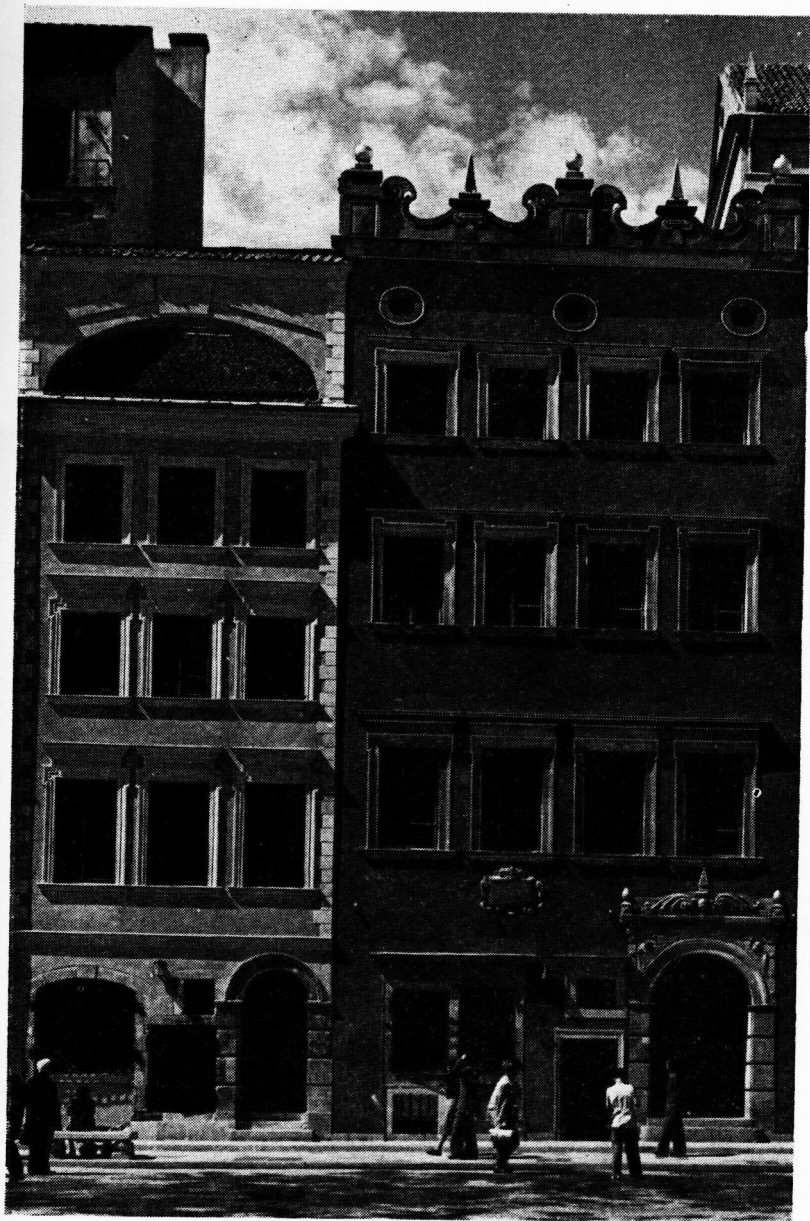


PLATE 4. A detail of two houses in the Market Square of the Old Town  
(page 32).

introduce colour and at the same time to express the historical events with which certain buildings were linked. Judging by what was discovered during the work, the houses in the Market Place were richly decorated in the 16th and 17th centuries. (Plates 3 and 4).

A special group of artists were collected together under the leadership of Professor J. Sokolowski to carry out the decoration of the houses, which are now covered with rough-cast, sgraffito, frescoes and murals. While one group of artists were working on the exterior of the buildings, another group proceeded with the decoration of the interiors. The result of all this careful work can only be described as fabulous. Indeed the whole project is nothing short of miraculous both in quantity and quality. It is quite astonishing that a country which lost a fifth of its population in the war is capable of producing so much good-quality building.

The final step of the Old Town reconstruction is now being taken. Although several of the fortified towers, the barbicans and part of the walls have been restored, the entire fortifications are not to be so treated. A park, in which the surviving parts of the walls will form a decorative feature, is being laid out to encircle the Old Town in the area of the moat. The centre of reconstruction has already moved to the adjoining Royal Castle of Warsaw, which was dynamited down to the foundations by the Germans in 1944. However, the work of rebuilding such a complex historic building must surely take many years.

It is difficult to put this tremendous task of restoration in its right perspective, as we in this country have never known destruction on such a scale. The Polish people have had to rebuild everything, their economy, their population, their culture, in fact to rebuild a nation. Viewed in this light surely the reconstruction of the finest part of its historical architecture is a step in the right direction and at least some idea of Poland's heritage in building can be handed down to future generations.