The following is a reprint of a fictitious periodical entitled Filter Detroit — my attempt at situating Warsaw and its wartime architectural morphologies in the context of the "motor city". Skarpa Warszawska [The Warsaw Escarpment], Filter’s real sister publication, is the graphic and discursive medium by which I juxtapose post-1945 utopian Polish planning and current discussions around Detroit’s future urban morphologies and real estate structures. Filter references Kirsten Niemann’s Detroit house and art foundation by the same name. For two weeks in the summer of 2010, Filter Detroit hosted a group of urban researchers from the Bauhaus University Weimar under the supervision of Frank Eckardt. In each of my texts, positioned graphically in conversation with articles in the second issue of Skarpa Warszawska dated October 28, 1945, I reflect on the Weimar group’s fieldwork in Detroit. Each article in Filter remains in conversation thematically and graphically with a specific article in Skarpa. Thus the two publications — the fictitious and the historical — come to exist in contemporary discourses on modernism, the picturesque, war, ruin art, ruin fascination, and the imagined decline of the American industrial city. In the image printed here, my annotated reproduction of Skarpa Warszawska peeks out from under a copy of a contemporary resuscitation of the post-war periodical. Skarpa, which existed for one year only, was a serialized manifesto for post-war functionalist planning and as such requires an architectural reading that includes a topographical and typographical analysis. For me, reproducing Skarpa, its overall dimensions, margins, gutter sizes, and variations in fonts, was a productive experience in graphic mimesis that allowed me to engage with the historical text in a spacial way, highlighting the transposition in space and time of Polish ideas onto Detroit and vice versa. The final mimetic act was to produce a logo for Filter Detroit — an engagement of the symbolism behind, rather than the form of, Skarpa’s logo.
BASICS OF MATERIAL CONVERSION

"To dokładnym poznaniu istniejącej rzeczywistości... widzieć takie etapy, w których poszczególne etapy dostrzega się przebudową..." [After a thorough investigation of existing conditions... clear stages can be identified where selected areas become ripe for conversion] (Zygmunt Skibniewski, "At the Foundations of Contemporary Urbanism" Skarpa Warszawska, 28 XI 1945)

When translating the Polish word przebudowa I was struck by its complexity of meaning. The word, that consists of the prefix prze, implying a transition or change, and the stem budowa meaning construction or the process of building, has no English equivalent. The word odbudowa, on the other hand, can be translated directly in a way that respects its original structure. Od-budowa is re-building or re-construction. However, in przebudowa, the relationship of the stem to the prefix cannot be respected in translation. Only the word conversion denotes that fundamental transformation of form.

When applied to a city in ruin, especially in the case of 1945 Warsaw, conversion poses a formal problem. If the city is converted then it is forcefully made to change its allegiance. In a religious sense, a convert is a person who either chooses or is obligated to change one world-view or is oblicgated to change one world-view in order to claim space. (Chmielowska, "Vectors of Looking. Reflections on the Luftwaffe's aerial survey of Warsaw, 1944"). Materially, these ideological conversion resulted in a landscape of destruction that reads through aerial photographs as a "morphology of ruins." Throughout 1939 – 1945, German and Soviet armies subjugated Warsaw to compound, layered violence creating a palimpsest of destruction - a diversity of ruin forms largely autonomous of their violent modes of production. The spatial conversion of Warsaw was dependent on an understanding of the statics and dynamics of different types of ruins. These became both the obstacles to, and the stores of material for, new construction.

Andrew Herscher proposes that destruction is a form of construction "irreducible to its supposed contexts and productive of the very identities and agencies that supposedly bear on it as causes." (Herscher, Violence Taking Place, p. 25) Thus destruction is formulated in a causal relationship with construction through various layers of violence. If this contemporary conceptualization were to hold for post-war Warsaw, why then was the ruin - the basic unit of urban morphology in 1945 – entirely absent from a conversation on the foundations of post-war planning? Where was the "thorough investigation of existing conditions?" Conversion in Warsaw was spatial, ideological, but perhaps most importantly, material. A cycle of material conversion brought the pre-war building physically into post-war construction. Buildings destroyed in the war, no longer regarded as architecture and no longer private property, were termed rubble. As such, they were denied form, dispossessed of any site specificity or historical meaning of any memorial or symbolic anchors. They became raw material - like an ore ready to be mined and converted into practical construction units.

Most notably, the architect Bohdan Lachert built the housing districts that now occupy the areas of Warsaw's former Jewish Ghetto both upon rubble and of the same rubble. Gruselovene - the conversion of a ruined concrete - a post-war neologism was used to construct low-rise block housing. Initially left without an exterior finish, it was an eloquent reminder of the reality of the cyclical nature of destruction and reconstruction, of remembering and structuring forgotten.

Learning from Warsaw, how can we look critically at the material conversion of Detroit today? In Detroit, artists and architects propose conversion as a way of liberating the valueless, the waste, the rubble that occupies abandoned lots in various states of decay. In an intriguing parallel to early post-war Warsaw, they observe a revauning of private ownership and suggest revolutionary modes of urban occupation.

"As owners and caretakers, both formal and informal, abandon valueless property, that very same property becomes available for other forms of occupation, other practices and activities, and other regimes of value... What usually appears to be the 'ruin' of the city thus becomes productive and potential... Here architects' pre-occupation with form finding transmutes into a collaboration not only with given forms, sites and practices but also more profoundly with the city that form traditionally denies or ignores." (Herscher, "Detroit Uneral Estate Agency" Volume 18 2008, p. 95)

Detroit, as Herscher sees it, seems to have the opportunity to take the opposite route to Warsaw. Rather than a introduc a top-down economic and social plan, Herscher finds in the agency of "creative speculation" potential for an experiment in urban sustainability that, however, includes social and economic problems in its discourse. He claims that the "ecology of the abandoned city introduces new values." (Herscher, 2008, p. 94). Yet upon close inspection, the same conditions of dispossession that plague Warsaw, must be considered in Detroit.

When residents move material to create art installations, meeting places, or informal playgrounds, they slowly convert the street according to a new aesthetic that intentionally ignores value in its "hegemonic formulation." They frame this entropic transmutation as redemption. The city's potential redemption relies on a form of conversion, the city as ruin is placed outside the market economy and its formerly owned spaces become dispossessed and therefore available for occupation by new groups (functioning within different regimes). Although Herscher's proposition is based on a contestation of capitalist property regimes and the positive valuing of grass-roots moves, and while dispossession in Detroit can be construed as violent occupation and dispossession as the bases for an urban strategy are nonetheless troubling. Can Detroit be converted to a non-hegemonic, 'unreal' economy outside the market through its material transformation? Is this conversion simply a logical step in a 'natural' cycle of prosperity and decline? Is it a form of urban self-mutilation where the structures that traditionally organize the physical and social boundaries in a city have been weakened to a point where the city enters a process of self-destruction? Is the art community contributing to a self-inflicted violent occupation and dispossession of the city? Or are they, as Herscher argues, proposing an alternate economy that, by placing itself outside hegemonic structures, may hold the key to mediating the suffering and violence that is so often ignored in the planning discourse?

In the opening paragraph to "At the Foundations of Contemporary Urbanism," Skibniewski writes: "The core idea of progress is contained in the continuous tendency of each human towards individual development. Only the planned organization of communal living, based on the conscious aspiration for higher forms of social life, can lead to the ideal of personal freedom." Acknowledging the different political and ideological frameworks within which Skibniewski, Herscher and I think and write, and those which we reference - our knowledge of so many urban failures - can we still place our faith in architectures and urbanism? Or have we lost that faith entirely and the only future Moran Street has is local, involving the conversion of material and people, the energy of 'cultural entrepreneurs' and other residents who will lead to new and provocative urban landscapes and new modes of social organization? Is Moran Street transitory in its material conversion? Is moving planks, glass, nails, furniture, a catalyst for exploring new modes of functioning outside the market economy? Will this experiment avoid the pitfalls of control and oppression that befalls established regimes? Let us hope that Moran really is a laboratory for urban change in America.
“Amoeba project” - the lungs of the city

“Within the city’s granite building mass, green spaces take the role of airways that channel wafts of air from fields, meadows, forests and water… sitting urban neighbourhoods butt from the pulse of life, and giving them respite and relaxation. Greenery surrounds the entire urban organism guarantees its health.” (Jerzy Grabowski, “Warsaw Among Gardens, Fields and Forests,” Skarpa Warszawska 28 XII 1945)

The title of the Polish weekly architectural and planning magazine Skarpa Warszawska refers to the Warsaw escarpment that follows the river Vistula along the entire length of the city and forms the only significant change in elevation in an otherwise level terrain. The title, by referring to Warsaw’s green space rather than to its flat environment, communicates the functionalist program of its publisher, the Capital Reconstruction Office, commonly known as BOS. (BOS was formed in 1945 by the interim Polish government to attempt the task of rebuilding Warsaw after the destruction of World War Two.)

BOS employed the picturesque, and specifically the English landscape tradition, as a tool for its program of de-densification, fulfilling pre-war longings for ‘ventilation corridors’ and ‘wedges’ of fresh country to de-congest air. In the 18th century, a necklace of aristocratic residences and landscape gardens, stretching along the entire length of the city and well beyond, occupied the War saw escarpment. Although many of these parks were destroyed during the city’s rapid expansion in the 19th century, many stand again today. The post-war reconstruction of those parks and diminution of dense 19th century inner city fabric was part of BOS’s vision for a new functionalist Warsaw. The re-location of most planning institutions, including BOS departments, in reconstructed Palaces along the escarpment ideologically colonized the skarpa.

Complicated later by Stalin’s tightening grip on Poland, during the early post-war years (1945-1948), in a politically dubious climate where the installation of the communist regime was still a way to deal with catastrophe, BOS was composed of professionals whose credentials, as well as their pre-war leftist political allegiances, secured them a position in an organization that effectively determined the impetus for forming Warsaw as it is today. Although their immi nent ‘leftist’ under Stalin’s dictate of socialist realism would render obsolete, at least superficially, their functionalist program, the years 1945-1948 were a time of great hope for creating a futuristic socialist city and continuing the ambitious ideological project of modernism begun in Warsaw in the 1930s.

Functioning relied on the picturesque as a narrative-creating machine for a city that was to be completely restructured. The aristocratic gardens appropriated for public use conveniently served both socialist and functionalist ideologies. The city, designed as detached buildings in park-like settings, would become an extension of its central nervous system – its symbolic lungs – How will it escape death? But the recycling of picturesque ideas did not stop at park conservation. In “War saw Among Gardens, Fields and Forests”, Grabowski identifies specific ideological uses for the escarpment; it would not only constitute the environmental lungs of the city, but also become a physical narrative for the entirety of Polish folklore, through an “ethnographic synthesis of all of Poland”. Polish highlanders strolling among herds of sheep and past mountain cottages would replace the hermits and caves that famously mediated time in landscape gardens.

Although never realized, these visions, which at a glance seem to collide with BOS’s modernist program, were inherent to accepting a doctrine of progress. The reality of ruins in Warsaw could only be forgotten if replaced by a manufactured rural landscape – a fabricated Heritage, as David Lowenthal calls it: that was to form the core of an urban complex!

According to Andrew Herscher, architectural heritage and modernization are directly linked. Describing a photograph depicting a modern building in former Yugoslavia rising behind the “object” heritage of the pre-modern and pre-socialist architecture of the Kosovar town of Dакo вica, Herscher writes: “In one guise, architecture was an object of construction, the ‘modern constructions’ that manifested what modernization was; in another guise, architecture was an object of destruction, an abject heritage of modernity that made manifest what modernization was not.” Heritage, in this understanding, is an invention of modernization itself – the creation of yet uncodified pre-histories.

One project that is noteworthy, is what Pitera calls the amoeba project. The concept is simple: turn such an empty lot, which owns large numbers of individual lots, as a result of foreclosures, but has no money to buy land for planned development, why not weave a city project over existing lots and redefine traditional notions of centralized, rigid, and geographically contained public space? Amoeba would not only utilize abandoned land, but also abandoned infrastructure, turning facto ries into multilevel agricultural operations and residential buildings into greenhouse farms. Farming, in Pitera’s project, takes the place of commerce which can consistently be found in almost every urban environ ment, differentiating it from the rural.

The current state of the Warsaw escarp ment is relevant to Detroit (and Pitera’s amoeba particularly) in two ways. Geographically, the skarpa is a continuous green space that weaves through the ex tensive existing city parks to create a success ful meandering public space. It can be used as a relaxing way to pass through the city, but can also be accessed at any point along its length. Perhaps more importantly, BOS’s early post-war proposals (partially realized) for the skarpa included urban agriculture as a necessary counterpoint to de-densification. An enormous city that takes up what would otherwise be agricultural land, argues BOS planners, cannot sustain itself without devoting some of that green space to farming. Since densification is out of the question in Detroit now, embracing low density looks like the only solution.

Yet in implementing this solution, one cannot ignore the consequences of pushing the urban – rural boundaries to a point where either the urban disintegrates or the rural becomes semi-urban. One must question why we hold that boundary so dear, and perhaps the picturesque can be one of the tools that can help.

In Warsaw, architects invoked the picturesque not only as a pre-existing intellectual model that could be re-organized to promote a modernist urban logic, but also as a way to deal with catastrophe. In its aftermath in the context of rapid change framed as progress. The mechanism of nostalgia, used frequently in different guises and under different names in the picturesque tradition, helps to fabricate a sense of longing for a place that does not exist. In early post-war Warsaw it was employed in a context where the present could no longer be imagined. BOS foamed the removal of dense urban morphologies in favour of the semi-urban, semi-rural within the acceptable boundaries of the landscape tradition that had always been a part of the city. Elements of the rural that would be objectively erased - text (such as farmers, rural dwellings, animals) were to be placed safely in a sanctu ary of picturesque preservation, outside the city free to develop according to modernist principles.

Historical amusement parks may seem inauthentic, but they provide comfort in an environment that questions the validity of urban development. How will Detroit’s administrative bodies negotiate these diffic ult boundaries and will they be able to successfully counteract the erosion of what the rural has a controlled place within the urban? Can urban agriculture fields for both food and cultural production – literally outgrow the market economy?
It's my first week in Detroit and I'm sitting on an access from a boarded house on Morant Street. Looking south, down the street, I see a few burned out sheds made of studs and siding - but this time subsistence in the motor city. Yet this was not my focus. I spent the morning putting my ruin. I spent the morning putting it together and I begin slathering it with aestheticities of sublime urban ruins. I look up and see the Powerhouse. It too has a neighbourly watchdog; this time on site, and in context, balanced over the proper fence - presumably installed as a deterrent against trespassers. Painted in camouflage, the peace is reminiscent of the noise of a wartime aircraft dropped in place by the striped hoodoo. 

Thinking of the MOCAD installation I'm suddenly reminded of the doramas and barricades made of rubble and debris found in a Warsaw museum that celebrates the city's uprising of 1944. The Warsaw Uprising added hundreds of thousands of deaths to the close to half million who had already perished, and directly contributed to an attempt by the German army to annihilate the city. The museum is an award-winning multimedia project where filmed testimonies, throbbing walls, suspended air moulds, and lenticular reconstructions act like pseudo gravestones - or - and perhaps most probably in this particular street - an intervention from a local artist.

The research group I'm part of meets the current director of the Museum of Modern Art and we have a discussion about the placement of art back in the community. He asks if a utilitarian art piece can be 'the ruin' - a sort of manifesto of design as work. (http://www.mocadetroit.org).

The porch I'm sitting on is very hot. The sound is strong and blows down the seemingly unending tunnel of flimsy metal front porches to my right. This is Filter Detroit - a practice that coordinates a process that corroborates the city (capitalization, capitalization, efficacy, functionality, are) - by contrast, hand and body best and destructive at worst." (A colleague, Detroit U Terrestrial Agency, 2008, p. 95.)

There's a house up house I'm looking at is the Powerhouse project by a local painter and architect couple Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert of Design 99 (http://www.visit99.org). The Powerhouse is an artist residence, studio space and art installation carved out of typical Detroit housing stock. Gina and Mitch's work from the Powerhouse (the utilitarian art objects they use as tool and product) have been exhibited at a refurbishcd downtown deal shop turned exhibition space - Detroit's new Museum of Contemporary Art. The work is professionally arranged against a backdrop of trendy green stripes that carry the group's name. In front, a small striped construction machine - a bobcat renamed 'hoodoo' - aligns with the wall painting. The composition is a three-dimensional logo - a sort of manifesto of design as work. (http://www.mocadetroit.org).

I go around to the back, and start painting. I go around to the back, and start painting. The bench I'm sitting on is very hot. The sound of trucks is strong and blows down the seemingly unending tunnel of flimsy metal front porches to my right. This is Filter Detroit - a practice that coordinates a process that corroborates the city (capitalization, capitalization, efficacy, functionality, are) - by contrast, hand and body best and destructive at worst." (A colleague, Detroit U Terrestrial Agency, 2008, p. 95.)

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