

# Straining to See: Contested views of Warsaw from the Palace of Culture and Science

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In the late summer of 2009, my friend Francis Tousignant and I documented several decaying sites in Warsaw for a research project on ruins as memorials. Among studies of broken bricks, chipped mortar, unhinged doors and fences cut open by war and neglect, I found four broad views from the 30th storey lookout tower of the socialist realist Palace of Culture and Science – a striking contrast to the hundreds of tectonic details in our collection. I also found a study of a stormy sky with a miniature of the Palace tucked away at the bottom of the image. In our quest to chronicle material fragmentation, even though we kept looking close to the surfaces of the city, Stalin's Palace still made its way into our documentation, viewing us as we circled it. In this set of short reflections on four elevated views of Warsaw, I explore the relationships between viewing and being viewed by reversing the traditional contemplation of the Palace as an impermeable object to be considered only from the outside. Instead, I use it as a platform from which to view the post-socialist city, to reflect upon its future from inside the symbol of its very recent colonial past.

Warsaw, devastated by war during Nazi and later Stalinist occupations, only now beginning to mend, negotiates its socialist legacy as it embraces the market economy. In Francis' curiously proportioned photograph, an enormous, brooding sky spreads across Warsaw. The Palace of Culture and Science – the uneasy centrepiece of the photographic composition – has become the city's contested emblem. Today, when three generations of Varsovians associate the Palace with learning, working, dancing, swimming, reading, watching, skating, and simply *being* in its presence, like so many symbols of colonialism, it has come to define the post-colonial city.

Taken from the roof of a building situated about 20 meters below the elevation of the city centre, the image captures the Palace in movement. The topography of the dark roofscape – the formerly working-class Powiśle district – mimics the broad, unregulated river, which flows directly behind the photographer. The roofs seem to carry along the partially submerged tower – as if the building were only a transitory presence. We almost expect it to topple, float belly up and then quickly move outside the frame, to be gone in an instant as the heavy clouds remain. Precarious in this image, in many other tourist photographs it is shown in distorted perspective, grasping at the fragile ground and asserting its bygone political imperative at what many would consider the geographic centre of post-socialist Warsaw under (re)construction.

Imposed on the city by Stalin's administration and embraced by the Polish political elite in the early 1950s, the building was already ideologically inappropriate when it was completed in 1955, two years after Stalin's death and just before the official denunciation of his dogma. By then no one really wanted the Palace. Local authorities downplayed its official opening in 1955 and the Warsaw periodical *Stolica [Capita]* (devoted to the city's architecture and culture) published only a few congratulatory sentences on the subject of its completion. *Stolica* did, however, publish several articles that outlined the Palace's extensive cultural program: with two full-size theatres, a museum, youth centre, swimming pool, congress hall, and hundreds of offices for educational institutions, the enormous building began then, and continues now, to permeate the patterns of daily life in the city.

Conflicting political, social and economic demands on the Palace and its surroundings have paradoxically protected Warsaw's most valuable land from the chaotic development characteristic of the adjacent business district. The Palace, with its parks and its east-facing Parade Square – once used for propaganda rallies hosted by Soviet and Polish dignitaries – occupies an enormous, flat area of 3 by 6 large city blocks (ca. 25ha) overtop what was once one of the more densely constructed residential districts in Europe. Like that of a massive sundial, the shadow of the Palace – something that the architectural theorist Mark Dorrian has studied in depth – travels each day over the buried foundations of hundreds of courtyard tenements destroyed and dispossessed by decree during and after the war, asserting its spacial dominance over the contested land. The master plan for the area has changed dramatically numerous times – the

political pawn of each, successive mayorship – but in all its incarnations it has assumed the preservation of the Palace (now a listed heritage building) and the substantial densification of the site through mid and high-rise commercial development. However, for the last quarter century since the fall of socialism, the space has remained populated only with temporary structures as pending claims for the restitution of private property stall final decisions.



### **Parade Square**

On July 21, 2009, one day before the 54th anniversary of the completion of the Palace of Culture (on the now-cancelled national independence day celebrated under communism), a privately hired security company tear-gassed a large crowd of merchants protesting the closure of the temporary 'KDT' market hall situated on Parade Square directly in front of the main, east entrance to the Palace. The protest was not an act of political dissidence (as my rhetoric might suggest) but a desperate act of civil disobedience against a planned eviction that had been announced months earlier. Whereas in the late 1990s going '*pod Pałac*' (to the foot of the Palace) was the thing to do if you were looking for a knock-off wedding dress or a cheap watch, by 2009, the market hall had outstayed its welcome. Within my circle of friends all were getting used to Poland's official standing in the European Union and were embarrassed by the

temporary structure, which visitors to Warsaw had to pass on their way from the train station to the nearest metro, 'Centrum'.

The market hall was built in 1999, to replace a jungle of freestanding stalls that had colonized most of the paved spaces around the Palace ten years earlier. In the mid 1990s, the stalls had encroached on the surrounding parks and even the sidewalk, so that getting anywhere in the city centre meant dodging merchants, food vendors and fortune tellers – a romantic scene that was also a menace to personal security. With its deliberate horizontality the replacement market hall crept, caterpillar-like onto Parade Square. Because it was never meant to be permanent, the industrial roof of the market sat lightly on the surface. The pavement of the square was never removed and when the hall was demolished after the protesters were pacified, treated for injuries and some even arrested, the square, paved with its recently forgotten stones, howled with emptiness.

One of the official reasons for the hurried removal of the merchants was the planned construction of the new Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Art was to replace pantyhose and shoelaces, but the city fired the project architect Christian Kerez in May of this year after several years of post-competition collaboration and millions of dollars spent on the project. The site has now again been occupied by a temporary structure – this time the technical support building for the metro under construction nearby.

Through the architectural expression of a new cultural program, the museum was to reclaim the space for the public and both formally and metaphorically reframe Parade Square. The competition brief asked for design proposals to address the square and especially the raised podium and underground chambers that had once served to protect and pamper communist party dignitaries during political rallies. The 'Socland' foundation, created to promote the construction of a new museum of communism (unrelated to the Museum of Art), had proposed that the square be transformed into an *agora* with an enormous beheaded statue of Stalin. The city rejected the tongue-in-cheek proposal and as for Kerez's winning entry, his renderings seem to propose an entirely generic treatment of the surfaces of Parade Square.

As the podium decays, the future of both museums remains uncertain. Pre-war owners seeking property restitution have legally contested the site. The claims are real. Pre-war lots have been carved out of the nearby park to the north and returned to the descendants of the former owners. Not being able to build permanently on the site due to zoning restrictions, one new owner has threatened to fence a once public square and fountain until the city agrees to compensate him for the land; another has erected a building-sized scaffolding for enormous advertisements. The intention may be cynical, but the 3D billboard, which naturally demarcates a volume similar to a typical pre-war tenement, is a poignant representation of the presence of disputed land, as well as the absence of pre-war fabric in Warsaw.



## Centrum

Varsovians habitually complain that their city has no centre. Formed by the Palace of Culture but at once unable to fully claim the partly alien structure as their urban heart, they are resigned to accept that colonial dominance has somehow come to symbolize Warsaw. The Palace looms over an informal sunken plaza, which serves as the pedestrian connector between the main metro station 'Centrum' – the only place in the metropolis that bears this label – and an adjoining public transit hub. The amorphous plaza was meant as a temporary solution but, as was the case with the market halls, it has become central to the city's patterns of movement and consumption. Eight different bus and tram stops feed into a circular underground passageway that doubles as a strip mall. Pedestrians, walking quickly through the continuous corridor, seem to mimic the circular movement of the traffic above. Always in a hurry, they emerge onto the plaza, under the modest blue and white sign 'Centrum' – informed that they have reached some sort of nexus.

For a brief moment, hundreds of thousands of Varsovians slow down, even stop, buy a bouquet of wild flowers from an elderly street merchant, look at the commissioned wall art, watch young break-dancers spin, or listen to a man drumming with two wooden sticks on an upside-down chair. In this void between the roundabout and the metro, they

seem to enter an intimate village on market day (Warsaw's current population is largely of rural origin). With their guard down, more open and fragile, they look back at the Palace, see it from below – massive and distorted – and again are compelled to hurry on.



### **One-legged**

When the Hotel Intercontinental was first designed in the early 2000s, it was a typical rectangular-plan tower. But after protests from local residents, it was realized that the volume would excessively shade the neighbouring apartment blocks. The design was altered and the tower carved out. It has sat precariously ever since on a tall, slim leg as if it wasn't really sure if it should or could be there, as if it needed to apologize to the Palace that it had once dared to challenge its hegemonic position.

Directly north of it, the low, horizontal 'Emilia' furniture pavilion has occupied this large lot since its construction in 1970. Once an iconic building, like many of the attractive and structurally innovative modernist pavilions of its time, it has been slated for redevelopment. Until that happens, the Museum of Modern Art, now left with little hope for the speedy construction of its permanent home on Parade Square on the opposite east-facing side of the Palace of Culture, has signed a lease with the city to rent 'Emilia'

for 3 years. Its new, temporary home adds to the street's conspicuous fragility. A museum, the protector of permanence, will soon be housed within a building whose life span can be measured in months.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the space of the photograph a different kind of fragility is pictured. The skeletal structure visible is that of the Złota 44 tower (in reference to its address on Ulica Złota or Golden Street) designed by Daniel Libeskind's office. In a situation similar to the Hotel Intercontinental, issues with building permits and, in this case, economic fragility stalled construction for years. Work resumed this March, the building was topped off in May and the cladding is being installed as I write this article. Fresh images in the press from the top floors of the tower advertise the most expensive condos in Warsaw. The popular daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* exclaims: "This is expensive, but what a view!"

The view is indeed impressive, but perhaps for different reasons than the press is willing to address. The building is so tall that it offers the first permanent dwellings with direct views of the Palace spire – something that only a few decades earlier would have been ideologically absurd. The Palace was built with the express purpose of signalling the dominance not just of Soviet ideology but, as Mark Dorrian suggests, of the bodily presence of Stalin himself. Spatially, rather than in relation to anything in Warsaw or even in Poland, its spire needs to be read as complementing a series of even larger 'sister' buildings placed in a ring around Moscow. Wealthy Varsovians can now choose to shed the Palace's shadow and view the once-dominant spire in the metaphorical shadow of their own property. Up high, they gaze at the Palace from a new social position where their real estate, or more broadly their sense of ownership over the city, seems unthreatened by the spectre of socialism.

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## **The Beacon**

If I look, straining, from either of the two apartments accessible to me in Warsaw, like countless other Varsovians I can see the Palace of Culture. I need to either lean precariously out the side of my family's south-facing 10<sup>th</sup>-floor balcony in the suburb of Ursynów or take the slow elevator to the 13<sup>th</sup> floor of my own building in the more central Mokotów district and look out the staircase window. Perhaps uncritically, I take comfort in the constant presence of this panoptical building. The Palace's dominance over the skyline is surprising. Over the past two decades, it has consistently been surrounded by new skyscrapers, which never surpass but often approach the height of its main volumes. Yet the building manages to stand alone as a beacon. This is partly because its extensive platform and surrounding parks continue to spatially set it apart from its neighbours, but also because the view cones from the Palace in the direction of the city's middle-class southern suburbs have remained virtually unobstructed.

Its contested strength lingers, brutally present in the city centre just as it is in the suburbs where the city continues to expand its already enormous swaths of apartment blocks. Layers and layers of receding mass housing projects, whether they face towards the Palace or away from it, have no choice but to exist in its presence and in reference to it as the marker of centrality. In this last photograph, each of the residents of each of the apartment blocks that blur into the horizon can see the Palace and perhaps imagine a reciprocity – that the tourists on the platform, and even the Palace itself in some



anthropomorphic imaginary, can identify them as existing separately from the haze. But viewing here is not reversible – the Palace cannot ‘see’ you with the same recognition that you see it. As the city expands, the Palace may lose sight of its domain entirely and there may even come a day when those at the very fringes of the city will no longer be able to make out the Palace, when it will disappear from their daily urban experience, begin to shimmer like a mirage and then slowly, quietly fade away, forgotten amid the banality of global sprawl, in socialism’s imagined eclipse by the market economy.

Note: All images by Francis Tousignant, Warsaw, 2009.