
Unwanted heritage and its cultural potential. Values of modernist architecture from the times of the Polish People's Republic

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to analyze the substance of Polish post-war modernist architecture, their meanings at the moment of their creation, and the way this architecture is understood today. The change in the reception of the legacy of modern constructions erected in the times of the Polish People's Republic is juxtaposed with theories of value of historic monuments and the theory of postmemory.

The history of Polish post-war architecture and its political meaning is a complex phenomenon. Socialist realism was in line with the content-coding system of objects built according to Soviet directives. Imposed academic classicism was the binding point of reference and its monumental character was a symbol of the power of the communist state. After 1956 the communist authorities noticed the propaganda potential of prestigious modernist works and the confrontation of Polish design ideas with Western ones, especially if the national idea came out of those confrontations victorious.

Projects carried out in the years 1945-1989 can be perceived as a sort of a challenge for researchers. Their evaluation and interpretations are often ambiguous, and the social reception, in spite of the growing common awareness of the subject matter, very diversified. At the same time, they belong to the area which is described by researchers as dissonant heritage.

The generation that entered adult life after 1989 often perceives the "badly born" heritage of the Polish People's Republic only through the perspective of modernist esthetics which is, however, judged by them radically differently than by the generation of their parents. The proof of the growing interest in the architectural legacy of the Polish People's Republic can be found not only in the increasing number of publications but also in the constantly growing number of cases of the secondary use of particular objects.

It was already John Ruskin who described architecture as the most political of all the arts. This is why over the centuries, it has often been at the center of interest of authorities willing to erect monuments in their name. At the same time, as regimes or rulers changed, monuments dedicated to their predecessors were subjected to harsh criticism and often doomed to be forgotten or destroyed. This regularity, seemingly unchanged despite the passing time, also defines the fate of modernist architecture in Poland in the second half of the 20th century.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the contents of Polish post-war modernist architecture, their meanings at the moment of their creation, and the way this architecture is understood today. The change in the reception of the legacy of modern construction erected in the times of the Polish People's Republic is juxtaposed with theories of value of historic monuments and the theory of postmemory.

Architecture of the Polish People's Republic – general characteristics

Architecture in the times of the Polish People's Republic was not a homogenous phenomenon. Over 45 years it evolved in the area of stylistics, reflecting the changing trends of global architecture. Economic, technological, and material conditions determining the construction process were also undergoing changes, whereas political circumstances had a strong impact on the nature of Polish construction in the following decades.

Architect Jerzy Hryniewiecki proposed a systematics that took into account the specifics of the political changes and dependency of Polish architecture after 1945 on the subsequent cycles of economic plans. He distinguished five consecutive stages. The first one was characterized by the continuation of pre-war schools and directions (1954-1949); the second stage was dominated by the socialist realist doctrine (1949-1956); the third stage marked the return to modernist ideas of function and construction. The fourth period brought on a certain threat related to the domination of urban projects, simplification of particular buildings to the simplest shapes, and limitations in terms of execution. Dichotomy and discrepancies between the planning activities and architecture became more profound in the following stage. The sixth stage brought about a breakthrough that occurred in the first half of the 1970s. It was principally related to the development of residential construction built with industrialized technologies which, unfortunately, did not develop according to expectations, as during the seventh period (1976-1980) the country came to the brink of an economic crisis [Szafer 1988, 6-7]. The above structure should be complemented by adding an eighth stage which would constitute Polish postmodernism, and a ninth one which would encompass the pluralistic architecture of the 1990s. Its original form, from 1945 to 1980, was mentioned by T. P. Szafer who simultaneously distinguished three generations of architects of Independent Poland [Szafer 1988, 7]. The representatives of the first generation laid the foundation for the national avant-garde architecture in the 1920s. Their successors were the generation of so-called "Columbuses" which was active during the first five post-war years. The third generation began its independent design activity in the 1960s.

The above-described periodization of the changes in Polish architecture after World War II strictly corresponds to the political changes. The years between 1945 and 1948 are the time when communist authorities were only laying the grounds for their regime in Poland. The unification of the Polish Socialist Party and the Polish Workers' Party and the formation of the Polish United Workers Party (Polish abbreviation: PZPR) which ruled in Poland up to 1989 allowed for a tougher course in external policy. In the middle of the following year, the doctrine of social realism was officially implemented, which was a direct transplantation of the Soviet model to the national ground. The National Council of Party Architects adopted a resolution that defined the directions of development of social architecture and indicated the most significant threats that might affect it, i.e. "formalism, nihilism, and constructivism, as manifestations of bourgeois cosmopolitanism, narrow traditionalism reflecting nationalist traditions, too narrowly understood economism..." [Rezolucja... 1949, 162]. Stalinist vision of architecture were applied until the year 1956 when the moderate reforms group came to

power. Since then, national architecture developed rather freely and the limitations were not a result of ideology but rather economic factors and technical and executive possibilities.

Modernism in the Polish People's Republic

Semantics of architecture with historical origins was based on models taken from the past. It was similar with the content-coding system of objects built in the style of social realism. According to Soviet directives, academic classicism was imposed as the binding point of reference. Monumental columns and pillars arranged in perfect order were to symbolize the emanation of power and strength of the new regime. In the reality of a communist country, the columns "were associated with rows of equal people in tight ranks, ready to fight for peace" [Izdebski 2013, 99-100]. References to the national renaissance (for example, high attics) clearly communicated that the new socialist authorities are truly Polish. What was, however, the symbolic meaning of the "glass boxes" which replaced the historicizing socialist realist forms after 1956?

When the National Council of Architects was condemning the errors and distortions of social realism, Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz was encouraging designers to return to the avant-garde idea. "Let the new period be characterized by the freedom of creation. Let nobody be afraid of innovativeness", he said [Skolimowska 2012, 88]. At the same time, along with the rejection of socialist realism in architecture, came the end of the period of ideological struggle. Cyrankiewicz's appeal to design in the spirit of modernity was a clear sign that the authorities set new objectives for Polish designers and artists. As Piotr Piotrowski correctly noted, "the communist construction of the «second Poland» didn't need socialist realist propaganda, but modern art that would not affect the status quo" [Piotrkowski 2011, 177]. Apparently idealess modernism became then a tool perpetuating the determined political and social order. In the era of the "mature socialist society", the direct meaning of a work of art was no longer the most important. "Palaces for the people" became the apple of the eye of the authorities which no longer favored the "glass boxes". "There was no more time or mood for ideology" [Nawratek 2005, 92].

Communist authorities noticed the propaganda potential of prestigious modernist works and the confrontation of Polish design ideas with the Western ones, especially if the national idea came out of those confrontations victorious. Key investments as far as image was concerned often came hand in hand with earlier, government-financed architects' trips whose objective was to take a peek at Western solutions. When Arseniusz Romanowicz and Piotr Szymaniak were preparing for the development of the final design of the Central Railway Station in Warsaw, they were sent abroad to see the latest Western achievements in this matter. It was a similar case before the beginning of the construction. "We were sent abroad to see and check particular solutions and technologies," Romanowicz reminisces [Romanowicz 2006, 72-73]. The designers visited Switzerland, France, and Belgium. They not only saw the building but also visited factories that manufactured specific parts of the structure (for example, escalators). The station was a priority investment and the authorities

made every effort for it to look as impressive as possible. “During the construction, Prime Minister Jaroszewicz, who was overseeing the construction, only asked what further materials we needed and he found the money” [Romanowicz 2006, 72]. When the construction works were over, the new station not only appropriately received Leonid Brezhnev who was visiting Warsaw in 1975 but was also praised behind the “iron curtain”. The following note even appeared in British press: “Go to Poland and learn to design stations” [Romanowicz 2006, 73]. It was not the only Polish construction appreciated abroad. The “Supersam” store in Warsaw, designed by Jerzy Hryniewiecki and Maciej Krasinski, stunned with innovative construction solutions of the hanging roof, which was corroborated by the honorary award at the Biennale in Sao Paulo in 1965.

Unwanted heritage

The demolition of the “Supersam” in 2006 triggered a heated discussion on the value of the architectural legacy of post-war modernism in Poland. It is then that the term “badly born” architecture was coined, and it did reflect the general attitude towards construction of the communist period.

In January 2011, Filip Springer published a book entitled “*Źle urodzone*” (“*Badly born*”) [Springer 2011], and this is how the construction legacy of the People’s Republic of Poland was branded. The term, although accurate and extremely catchy at the same time, does not

Fig. 1. One of the finest examples of Polish post-war modern architecture - “Supersam” shopping mall in Warsaw, demolished in 2006



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

represent the complexity of the issue. Projects carried out in the years 1945–1989 can be perceived as a sort of a challenge for researchers. Their evaluation and interpretations are often ambiguous, and the social reception, in spite of the growing common awareness of the subject matter, very diversified. At the same time, they belong to the area which is described by the researchers as dissonant heritage. This term usually defines material evidence of genocides, colonialism, or totalitarian regimes. Gregory Ashworth and John Turnbridge explained this “awkwardness” with a kind of a dissonance caused by the overlapping of different narratives and interpretative threads. Architecture may have different significance for different social groups and each of them assigns different meanings to it. Heritage or the process of its creation, implies disinheritance. According to Ashworth and Turnbridge “this disinheritance may be unintentional, temporary, of trivial importance, limited in its effects and concealed; or it may be long-term, widespread, intentional, important and obvious” [Ashworth, Turnbridge 1996]. Among the extensive group of objects considered to be “dissonant heritage”, we can distinguish those that are “undesirable heritage”. These include physical remnants of the past eras that represent values most of the contemporary society does not wish to be identified with, despite the understanding of the fact that they form an integral part of its history [Macdonald 2006, 11].

Is it, however, justified to state that the negative reception of the architectural legacy of the Polish People’s Republic results directly from its political connotations? Paradoxically, the social reception of the socialist realist construction of the MDM (Polish abbreviation for

Fig. 2. Socialist realist architecture of the Marszałkowska Residential District in Warsaw became an integral part of city landscape despite its clearly communist ideology



Photo: B. Ciarkowski

the Marszałkowska Residential District) in Warsaw seems to be much more positive than for the late modernist Central Station located in the same city. Columns and arcades and lavish (though filled with political content) details trigger much more positive reactions than simple, late modernist forms. Esthetics here stands in stark contrast with the historical and political content as the MDM was being erected in the times of Stalinist oppression, while the station was one of the flag works of the 1970s and the stability of Edward Gierek's period. Maybe the esthetic value should be adopted as one of the most significant criteria that determine the reception of post-war modernism.

In search of value

The fundament of the modern systems of assigning value to historic monuments should be sought in the theory published in Vienna in 1903 by Alois Riegl who distinguished historical, ancient, and monumental value, next to current, functional, artistic, and novelty values [Riegl 1903]. In the manner typical of his period, Riegl perceived a historical monument as a document of past eras. The criteria of value attribution to historical monuments proposed in the 1960s by Walter Frodl constituted the development of the Riegl's theory [Frodl 1966]. Enriched with the tragic experiences of two world wars, the system partially undertook to vindicate the practice of reconstruction and restoration of the objects with special emotional value. A very significant step in the development of the theory of value attribution to historical monuments was a study developed by the researchers from the Getty Institute entitled "Values and Heritage Conservation" [Avrami, Mason De La Torre 2000]. The authors developed previously elaborated solutions adapting them to the current specifics and requirements. This is why among the value categories they discuss, we can find cultural and ethnic as well as cultural and historical values, together with a number of values related to the economic aspects of the legacy.

The above-mentioned system of value attribution to historical monuments is a starting point for further discussions regarding specific groups of objects with determined characteristics. The architecture created after 1945, including post-war modernism, can be regarded as such. Its peculiar uniqueness is, among other things, the result of a rather limited time period that divides us from the moment a given building was constructed and the above-mentioned problems with a conclusive method of attributing value to historical monuments. The viewers do not easily accept the fact that the legacy and tradition of a relatively recent age should be protected. The fact that recent times, often marked by individual experiences, "may generate objects worthy of protection" [Świt-Jankowska 2017, 136] is hard to accept.

The case with an artistic value criterion often affected by the subjective perspective of the viewer is quite similar [Prośniewski 2014, 120-121]. Jan Sowa mentioned the weak roots "modernity" has in Polish culture, stressing that as a phenomenon it was often a foreign and imposed element [Sowa 2016, 13-14]. His conclusions are reminiscent of the discussions of architects in the beginning of the 1980s, when attempts were made at a rejection of Corbusier

and seeking inspiration in national traditions. The weak roots of modernism in the social awareness and culture are not the only answer or a sufficient one to the question why the modernism of the Polish People's Republic became an "unwanted child of the era". An important argument is the fact that modernist architecture does not age well. "Modernism is the current moment," wrote Szymon Syrkus in 1926 [Wujek 1986, 221]. With such premises, it was the art of the current moment and the adapted solutions and methods were characterized by impermanence, as once a given problem was solved, their existence was no longer justified. As Giuliana Bruno affirmed, modernist buildings "do not age with ease, grace, and elegance" [Klein 2008, 20].

The lack of acceptance for the difficult esthetics as well as widespread maladjustment of the objects erected in the 1960s or 1970s to the current standards cause the constructions from the period of the Polish People's Republic to be subjected to transformations and renovations. Such works as well as demolitions were usually conducted without taking into account the original design assumptions or the opinions of the living designers. Waclaw Zalewski said that when he learned about the demolition of the Warsaw "Supersam", "he felt sad" [Waclaw Zalewski... 2013, 32]. If the capital authorities and the city architect had asked him back then about his opinion on the matter, he would have said that the corroded steel elements of the construction could be replaced. Unfortunately, nobody asked him such a question despite the fact the Zalewski was one of the authors of the design. Ignoring the fact that a given object is someone's work is a widespread phenomenon. In the case of the "Supersam", the determining factors were the economic issues (the values mentioned in the Getty Institute's study, for example) related to the very low construction development of the areas in the center of Warsaw. Quite often though it is the esthetic preferences of the decision makers that decide about the works being performed. Architect Witold Milewski objected to the idea of giving Poznan University of Technology a new color scheme. In the end, the final solution "may be judged in different ways" [Milewski, Skupniewicz, Sternal 2006, 74]. "Nothing changes the fact, however, that this means in fact not taking into consideration someone's creation," [Milewski, Skupniewicz, Sternal 75], concluded Milewski.

Polish People's Republic modernism and memory

Zdzisław Bieniecki in his article "The Need for and Ways of Preservation of the Most Recent Architectural Objects", published in 1969, was one of the first to discuss the subject of protection of modernist architecture. In the introduction he pointed out an extremely significant phenomenon conditioning the reception of the legacy, "regularity of the oscillatory reaction against the previous period and the approval for its predecessor" [Bieniecki 1969, 83]. "The times of our parents are only funny, those of our grandparents – captivating," he cited an aphorism [Bieniecki, 83] which reflects the architectural situation of the Polish People's Republic's legacy quite correctly.

Pierre Nora defined memory as a term opposite to history. He stressed the fact that memory takes roots in tangible aspects, specific places, gestures, images, and objects, whereas history is associated with the time continuum, with progress and relations between things [Nora 2009, 5]. According to Nora, memory is an absolute notion, while history belongs to the domain of relativism. Following this direction of thinking, it should be understood that historians “cultivate only a certain trend of specific memory” [Nora, 6] subject to a determined narrative. They create a partial image that is not free of subjectivity. The simultaneously undertaken attempts to archive the crumbs of memory are at the foundation of the system of sites of memory (*lieux de memoire*), which in turn forms the basis of our identity. These are the places where a given society stores its memories. Can we, however, talk about common memories of the entire society or rather a common history and individual memories loosely related to it?

Generations that still remember the time of the Polish People’s Republic have a different view of the architectural heritage of those years than younger generations. The fact that a given place may be a “realm of memory” is rarely a sufficient argument for its protection, especially if we talk about individual, not group, memory. Moreover, the generation that grew up in the times of communism often suffers from the forgetting mechanism which, according to Paul Connerton, constitutes an element of the process of new identity creation. The political transformation has doomed everything that reminded of the previous system to be regarded as the “condemnation of memory” [Connerton 2008, 60-63]. At the same time, Connerton writes that forgetting may directly result from an information deficit [Connerton, 64], which is why there is awareness of the value of a given object. The simplified vision of history and the lack of a comprehensive image of the phenomena that accompany the creation of specific buildings of urban complexes often cause them to be perceived as the symbols of totalitarian enslavement and “carriers of bad memory” [Kula 2002, 290-291], whereas their significance in social projects of a modernist nature is rather omitted.

Cultural potential

The generation that entered adult life after 1989 often perceives the “badly born” heritage of the Polish People’s Republic only through the perspective of modernist esthetics which is, however, judged by them radically differently than by the generation of their parents. The proof of the growing interest in the architectural legacy of the Polish People’s Republic can be found not only in the increasing number of publications but also in the constantly growing number of cases of the secondary use of particular objects.

The building of the Warsaw-Powisłe station has been converted into one of the more popular clubs in Warsaw and its uniqueness is to a great degree owed to the originality of the architecture designed by A. Romanowicz and P. Szymaniak, as well as the preserved authenticity of the form, details (for instance, the neon) and interior design. A similar plan of adaptation was implemented for part of the lobby in the Forum hotel in Cracow or in commercial facilities in the center of Łódź. The club located in the building of the former Hotel Powisłe

in Warsaw has gained an almost legendary rank. Exceptional status was also earned by the premises of the National Art Museum in the former furniture shop Emilia. Despite the fact that social organizations focused on the protection of post-war modernism did not manage to prevent the building's demolition, they forced the disassembly and relocation of the impressive reinforced concrete roofing which was to become a part of the new building. It is worth mentioning at this point that

Fig. 3. The unique architecture of the Warsaw-Powisłe train station is a landmark in the city space... and became a logo of the popular club and cafeteria



Photo: B. Ciarkowski

the users of the above-mentioned objects avoid their excessive aesthetization. Shabby, partial deterioration does not give the impression of being neglected, but adds the "air of antiquity" that enriches the architecture instead of disfiguring it.

This "search for authenticity" makes the relics of the socialist realist modernist architecture gain a growing interest among fans of so-called alternative tourism. Next to "traditional" historic monuments, modernist architecture trails are emerging in various Polish cities. The heritage of the Polish People's Republic seems exceptional with regard to both its formal distinctiveness and authenticity [Rogatka, Środa-Murawska 2016, 135-137], and residential districts, single buildings, or ruins may become the subject of touristic interest. Among representatives of the last category, those which enjoy popularity in certain circles are, among others, unused holiday resorts in Dźwirzyn and Ustronie.

Fig. 4. Demolished sanatorium in Ustroń which became an alternative tourist attraction



Photo: B. Ciarkowski

The potential of the post-war modernist architecture is not limited to alternative touristic routes. Over the past decade, we can observe an increased interest in the heritage of communist construction among a younger generation of artists. This heritage includes both generic districts of large-panel blocks of flats and buildings-icons. A number of exhibitions, such as "Concrete heritage. From Corbusier to blockers" or "In the discordant city" have focused on the issue of the "unwanted heritage" and curators often made efforts to show the effect modernist architecture had on the society. The icons of the post-war architecture were what inspired the artist Mia Kiesner when she created a cycle of paintings "Warsaw cityscapes" [Klein, 20] and Katarzyna Jasińska who made a series of serigraphs depicting, among others, "badly born" buildings from Polish biggest cities.

In recent years, the problem of the preservation of the post-war modernist architecture in Poland has ceased to be a question raised only by a group of enthusiasts and in scientific circles. Gradual removal of the odium of the "carriers of bad memory" is still ongoing; however, at the same time, the uniqueness of Polish architectural ideas of the second half of the 20th century and its links to both interwar avant-garde tradition and post-war global architectural trends are being noticed. Thanks to the discussion over the "badly born" surpassing a narrow academic scope, an increase can be observed in the general awareness of their enormous cultural-forming potential and significance for the local society.

Fig. 5. Katarzyna Jasińska's serigraphy portraying the Warsaw-Powisłe train station

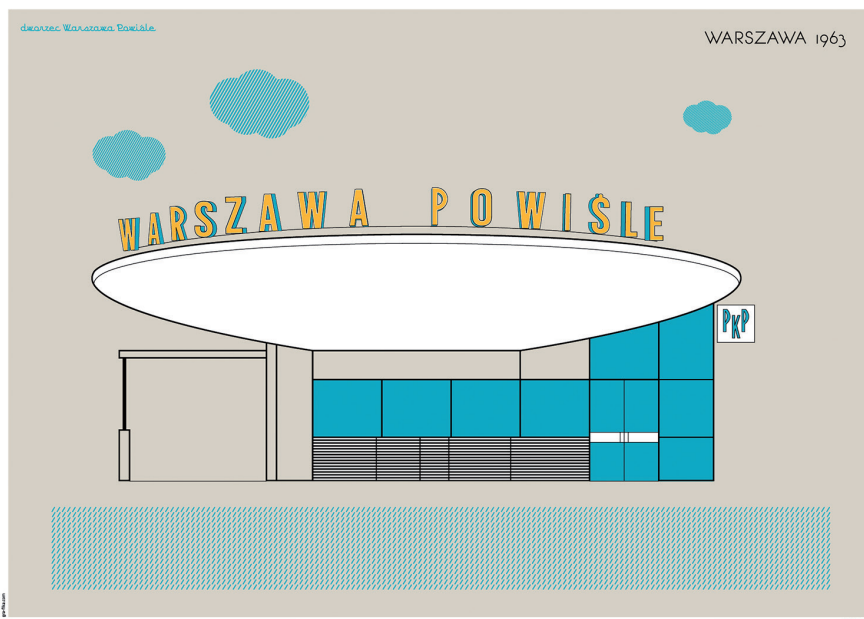


Photo: K. Jasińska, Gra-fika

Fig. 6. "Spodek", a multipurpose arena in Katowice - one of the prestigious public buildings which aimed to outshine western architecture.

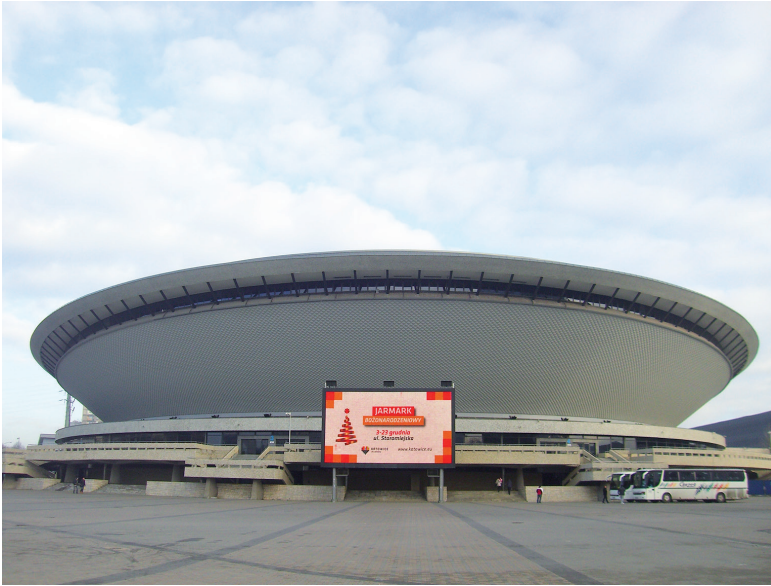


Photo: B. Ciarkowski

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Niechciane dziedzictwo i jego potencjał kulturowy. Wartości modernistycznej architektury z czasów Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej

STRESZCZENIE

Celem niniejszych rozważań jest analiza treści zawartych w polskiej powojennej modernistycznej architekturze, ich znaczenie w momencie powstania, oraz sposób w jaki jest odbierana obecnie. Zmiany recepcji dziedzictwa nowoczesnego budownictwa wzniesionego w czasach PRL-u, zostały zestawione w teoriach wartościowania zabytków, a także teorią post-pamięci.

Historia polskiej architektury powojennej oraz jej politycznych znaczeń jest zjawiskiem o złożonym charakterze. Architektura utrzymana w nurcie socjalistycznego realizmu zawierała system kodowania treści zgodny z radzieckimi dyrektywami. Ogdornie narzucony akademicki klasycyzm był obowiązującym punktem odniesienia, a jego monumentalny charakter miał być symbolem potęgi komunistycznego państwa. Po 1956 roku komunistyczne władze dostrzegały propagandowy potencjał prestiżowych modernistycznych realizacji oraz konfrontacji polskiej myśli projektowej z Zachodem- zwłaszcza jeśli rodzima myśl wychodziła z owych konfrontacji zwycięsko.

Realizacje z lat 1945-1989 stanowią swoiste wyzwanie – zarówno dla badaczy, jak i architektów, konserwatorów czy administracji. Ich ocena i interpretacja często bywają niejednoznaczne, a odbiór społeczny, pomimo rosnącej w tej materii powszechnej świadomości, bardzo zróżnicowany. Tym ym przynależą do obszaru, który przez badaczy bywa określany mianem niechcianego (lub niekiedy- kłopotliwego) dziedzictwa.

Generacja, która w dorosłe życie wkroczyła po roku 1989, często postrzega „złe urodzone” dziedzictwo Polski Ludowej jedynie przez pryzmat modernistycznej estetyki, która jednak oceniana jest przez nią diametralnie inaczej niż przez pokolenie ich rodziców. Dowodem rosnącego zainteresowania architektonicznym dorobkiem PRL-u jest nie tylko rosnąca ilość publikacji, ale także coraz bardziej powszechne przypadki wtórnego wykorzystania poszczególnych obiektów.

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specjalizuje się w zagadnieniach architektury PRL-u oraz ochrony dziedzictwa architektury modernizmu; członek PKN ICOMOS, członek OŁ SHS; Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, Politechnika Łódzka, al. Politechniki 6A, 90-001 Łódź, e-mail: b.ciarkowski@gmail.com