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Warsaw Dreams Itself Tall.

Between fictional narrative and urban myth.

Jennifer Buyck & Ilona Woronow

Abstract

Traversing a period of transition initiated by the opening up of its borders and the liberalization of its economy, Warsaw is rising again. Towers designed by world-famous architects are conferring an international image on the city, confronting the conventional imagery associated with the capital city. What lurks behind this obsession with high-rise building? We will question the status, the function and repercussions of the narratives and the images that condition the ways these structures are to be seen and « read » within the context of the city. Who has dreamed of Warsaw as a city of towers ? Who are these buildings intended to « address » ? Confronting with these questions, we study the modalities of communication and thought through which inhabitants, political decision-makers, architects and investors are drawn into relation, and arrive at the following hypothesis : that non-institutional discussion is founded on urban myths recounting, and at the same time embodying the transformation of Warsaw, thus narratives that are present, if implicitly, in discussions on the city. They distill the hyper-complexity of the real yet also bring a schematic, unifying model to it. Identifying and analysing the inter-text formed by a heterogeneous body of statements arising in a diversity of “sites”, we attempt to reconstruct the story of the construction of the capital city, that is of the myth of a New Warsaw emerging within the collective imagination. Men constantly seek out and reactivate myths from a common, universal heritage; at the same time, they also contribute to the emergence of temporary mythologies reflecting aspirations and fears of a given time; narratives that play a vital role in the development from one intermediate reference-point to another. Warsaw appears here as the protagonist of such myths, which are no less essential for being ephemeral, and which are indispensable components of the creative process of urban development.

Key words :

Urban imagination, intertextuality, towers, metropolis, myth, Warsaw.

Warsaw nevers stops re-writing itself

Some see it as an “urban palimpsest”, others as a sort of self-erasing, self-rewriting manuscript. Wiped out during the war then furtively re-written by those who survived it, redrawn by urbanists, punctuated with commercial buildings in the 1990’s which were in turn frequently replaced by skyscrapers ten years later, Warsaw has not ceased to ‘rewrite’ itself. Confronted with the current absence of urban planning, the local and national presses addressing themselves to either professionals or amateurs propose possible plans in newspaper articles, on social networks and internet sites. Together, these constitute a sort of virtual laboratory of urban esthetics and politics. Enriched by the reasoned positions of urbanists, the audaciousness of architects, the appetite of speculators, the speculations of politicians, by the discontents, expectations and desires of inhabitants, Warsaw’s future will take form somewhere *between* the stories all of them tell.

When Warsaw dreams itself tall

Towers are perceived as unique elements in the contemporary landscape of Warsaw. They announce the arrival of the modern metropolis, and serve as emblems of grandeur and forcefulness, of vitality and risk-taking (Setkowicz 2002). Ideological and political controversies come into focus around them. They stimulate discussion on such things as ecological projects, and even provoke surprising operative images of things such as futuristic transport systems. Since the Oskar Hansen exhibition of 2005 entitled “The Dream of Warsaw”, presented at the Foksal Gallery Foundation, towers have signified the passage from past to future. According to the architect in charge of the exhibition, the Palace of Culture and Science strongly dominates the context that surrounds it, evoking something like the status of king surrounded by servants. He asserts that only a tower with a new form could respond effectively and intelligently to such remains of Social Realism. “Open form” will triumph over “closed form”, the dialogue between the two will overwhelm authoritarianism and the violence associated with the latter. A rich ambiguity will replace univocal discourse.

Warsaw Imagined. : from dream to myth.

Eliciting widespread and highly impassioned responses, the towers of Warsaw are the object of what we would define as a *postmodern urban myth*. In analyzing such myths and taking into consideration their reach, one becomes aware of their capacity to simultaneously express instinctive reactions, serve financial interests in being retold, and even to inspire and

provide content for constructions of rational discourse. They insinuate themselves into the collective imaginations of the full range of political positions and touch all relevant scientific communities. They act less often as a source of prefabricated responses than as a “space” in which ideas take form. Collective imagination not only participates in the construction of modes of intelligibility; it also provokes excitement or uneasiness, and generates active responses. The collective imaginations of various disciplines interact with each other. Politicians, urbanists, developers and inhabitants share a certain amount of imagery and common history. The diversity of the origins of such myths imbues them with the power to forge vital, mutual engagements but also spawns problematically simplistic ideas. The promises they carry can be serious but also misleading, erroneous and/or disappointing. For this reason it is important to question them.

The rational component of the myth

The exercise of rational thought favors the creation a coherent, shared social bond. Playful, symbolically charged, artistic and religious activities have historically taken place alongside it, allowing men to construct common reference-points for confronting the complexity of the world. Even without claiming to be able to determine the nature of their referenciability, it can be said, following Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2005), that all forms of intelligibility and of communality “index” reality. A shared orientation with respect to the real renders them permeable to each other and initiates an ongoing process of osmosis. While it can seem indispensable to distinguish rational and irrational as two distinct “categories”, such a separation tends to hide the diversity of capacities that man requires to domesticate his habitat.

The historical dimension of the myth

Each historical period creates myths. The content and inherent structure of a given myth reflect the context in which it arose. The ancients and the first moderns wove vast narratives. Then, in the literary explorations of Balzac, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the myth underwent a double transformation. Firstly, older forms of narrative retracted in favor of a more compact, iconic form. Secondly, the nostalgia of the *illo tempore*, turned toward the past, dissipated in favor of perspectives oriented towards the future (Edelstein 2007). The myth comes to resemble a precise tool of violence, contagious in its appeal, with an acknowledged capacity to transmit ideas and ideologies (Sorel 1908).

Micro-narratives that make myths.

In a period where analogical thinking - plurivocal, supple, mobile and even weak - overwhelm univocal, demonstrative and normative modes of

reasoning (Hottois 1998), the myth becomes the “site” of an interweaving between image and history. As Francesca Polletta (2006) indicates, the contraction of the narrative is achieved at the price of a profound transformation of traditional structures. As they become more generalized, micro-scenes of everyday life cease to unfold in an explicit chronology. The presence of a character or characters is no longer seems indispensable. The principle of causality and the presence of identifiable values assume a secondary role with respect the sensible aspect of our knowledge of the city, and to issues concerning the distribution of the sensible. Only the need for surprise and the integrative function are retained from older textual forms. It is because of their continued presence that narrative continues to be socially identifiable as such in spite of the transformations it has undergone. Having lost its traditional role as a moral anchor and source of certainties, the myth nonetheless retains the federating capacity connecting it to manifestations of the magical. which “are not about establishing, in the eyes of the one speaking, what he is actually thinking, but rather to fix a relation with the person he is addressing, whether he or she is likely to be able to help him or not” (Delattre 2010).

Do micro-narratives make towers?

While at the end of the 17th Century the great mythic narrative *explained*, and, two hundred years later, mythic icons *decreed*, the micro-narratives of today knit diverse threads together. Concerning the towers of Warsaw, these include anecdotes concerning the construction site, remarks made by passers-by, songs, hymns to the highly sophisticated technology, words of pride uttered by workers, political diatribes, commented digital visuals, filmed guided tours, scenes from everyday life, description knitting a diversity of anecdotes together. It is impossible to find a common thread among all the stories. Unattainable, destined to remain implicit, the narrative that brings a coherence to all of them at once, is one that would distill “the hyper-complexity of the real into an imaginary model of a schematic and unifying nature” (Citton 2009). To extract its meaning one must question the diversity of expressions it engenders, considering each one in relation to all the others. In undoing their interweavings, one becomes aware of a general system of references that construct the founding myth of a postindustrial, post-communist society. Taking as starting-point the inter-text composed of a heterogeneous body of utterances from a diversity of “sites” (Genette 1982), we attempt to reconstruct the story of the building of a Capital city; the myth of a new Warsaw as it is forged in the collective imagination. We do so through three case-studies. The first concerns the “Warsaw Trade Center”; realized by the American office RTKL and the Polish office MWH-Architekci, finished

in 1999. Another, “Zlota 44”, also known as the “Glass Veil”, was designed by Daniel Liebeskind and is currently under construction. The third, called “Lillium”, by Zaha Hadid, is currently in the design stages. Together, these projects serve as a basis for questioning the status, the function and the possibilities inherent in the stories and the images that confer legibility, on visible and invisible levels, to the process of creation of the towers.

The transgression of convention limits

By common admission, the creation of the towers has caused existing limits to be surpassed. The question of their height is recurrent. Each building must surpass the height of the previous ones and be more audacious. It is impossible in Warsaw to engage wholeheartedly in this “Folly of height” (2008). The presence of the Palace of Culture visually crushes the structures surrounding it, and it is only today that architects are starting to be authorized to go beyond the 230-meter mark it establishes. Zaha Hadid’s building, rising 30 highly symbolic meters above the historical ceiling fixed by the Palace, is the only one so far to have been allowed to attain a greater high. At the same time, the race to be taller has been slowed down by real estate crisis. In the midst of their realization, towers are being shortened as a result of lack of means. The transgressions are limited when there are not simply undone or postponed. The urbanists themselves are overwhelmed. While in the 1970’s they were actively engaged in the making of urban form, their role today has diminished as that of the developers has grown (Kowalewski 2009). Excluded from the development of the city, planning itself is traversing a period of crisis. In a sense, this situation suggests that even the notion of metropolis has been left behind. Metropolitan development has taken on a wild, uncontrolled character as towers rise like weeds, the growth, the organization and the fundamental nature of which has escaped any form of rationalization. However, the towers are not the only participants in this brutal undoing of the city: periurban development reproduces the phenomenon in a horizontal form.

Standards

While the towers essentially contain offices, today they also can include numerous apartments that contribute to the densification of the city-center. While references are frequently made to the American metropolitan lifestyle, there are in fact two distinctly different models present. In Warsaw, there is no predetermined grid of streets. It is impossible to consolidate a dense sector, a “city of towers” (Paquot 2008). There is no single street of towers. The city fabric is loose and is punctuated throughout by skyscrapers (Coudroy de Lille 2009). The American reference is frequently employed by real estate agencies but the reality of the situation is much more complex. In fact, it is rather the Russian model of urbanization that is

operative here, though the truth of this tends to remain unacknowledged and even disavowed. Towers appear as isolated urban totems stranded in the midst of characterless areas. Difficult not to associate this image with that of the isolated villas whose traditional polish version is the manor. Influenced – consciously or not – by all of these, the towers or Warsaw are hybrid objects of indeterminate identity, though more and personalized in their design. With their own Facebook profiles and independent internet sites, photographed by amateurs at every stage of their construction, documented on film, the towers appear to have lives of their own. In order to appear more approachable, more familiar to all, they are without a character of their own. In being personalized, there are, paradoxically, deprived of identity. They become standardized objects.

Horizons

At the same time, in terms of form, each seeks to appear the more extravagant than its rivals. Today, the postmodern tower is replaced by “designer” towers : bases, bodies and tops are abandoned in favor of pedestals, envelops and finish at the top with flourishes. In being “liberated” from conventional constraints they appear more ostentatious. Zaha Hadid draws a lily, Daniel Libeskind propose à veil. In this way, they read together as a veritable catalogue of over-scales objects. These “untouring towers” (Paquot 2008) are nonetheless contextualized, inasmuch as they appear collectively as a sort of *cabinet de curiosités*, thus in spite of all as a family. Is this phenomenon specific to Warsaw? Do Hadid et Libeskind not construct everywhere? It appears we are witnesses to a high-rise, vertical conception of an emerging world made up of international metropolises, linked to each other through their totem towers, audacious design-objects. These new forms require new skies to rise to. Some images taken by amateurs October 12th 2012 in a very unusual fog are travelling around Poland. The developers of “Zlota 2” can be relied upon to proudly point out how the towers of Warsaw point their noses above the clouds. The advertising reflects the image of this rising into a sky above. Ads for “Lukacity” and “Babka Tower” proclaim, “Warsaw at your feet... rise to a higher class”. The tower is promise of disconnection from chaos of the city; that when one is there one is elsewhere, travelling, always with good weather.

As far into the city as possible

Object of ongoing debate with respect to their forms, their functions, the heights, their advantage, their potentially (inter)national identity, towers are important focal-points. At once in the heart of the metropolis and metropolis withing a metropolis, connectors of one metropolis to the others, they stimulate the urban fabric *through acupuncture*. Towers rise at crucial points in the city’s nervous system, like needles in a patient’s body.

Ivory Towers

The tower provokes a variety attitudes, or postures on the part of its inhabitants. He who seeks isolation, refusing contact and social engagement will find these options available to him. The inhabitant struggles to survive in his milieu. The idea of asylum is imagined... and even attempted, against all odds. What the result, the tower, distills, purifies, refines, consolidates and totalizes. And yet, the dangers of the *totalism* are not erased from the memories of the city's citizens. "It is sometimes all too easy to be unbendable in one's resolutions, to seek refuge in an ivory tower of purity, as all around fluctuates and disperses" (Barbusse 1935: 149).

Listen carefully

People have adapted to principle unlimited access to information and communication, thus to a tool which, while imperfect, is understandable to all. The freedom to invent stories is one of fundamental values of that world. Unlike their ponderous cousin, theory, stories are capable to conveying grace, lightness, precision and virtuosity (Citton 2009). Does rational discourse not occasionally promote improbable and even dangerous information? Does the weighty influence of their deeply defined arguments and minuteness of detail not lull readers to sleep? Yet, the essential danger of micro-narratives is not in their form. It resides in the latent narcissism associated with their mode of transmission. Robert Calasso asserted that the myth is "a narrative that one cannot understand without having had oneself the experience of narrating (Calasso, 1988). If all at once everyone started to tell stories, who would play the role of the receptor, that is, traditionally, the humble but indispensable reader? If something tends to be missing from this transitory world of stories, it is perhaps a solid culture of the listener, for promises only engage those who hear them.

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Caption for the illustration

L'évolution des tours à Varsovie (The Evolution of the Towers of Warsaw), by Jennifer Buyck, 2014.