

# RESIDENTIAL ESTATE ZA ŻELAZNĄ BRAMĄ (BEHIND THE IRON GATE)

RESIDENTIAL ESTATE ZA ŻELAZNĄ BRAMĄ. **STREETS:** UL. MARSZAŁKOWSKA, UL. TWARDA, UL. PERECA, UL. ŻELAZNA, UL. CHŁODNA, UL. MIROWSKA. **BUILT:** 1965-72. **ARCHITECTS:** JERZY CZYŻ, JAN FURMAN, JERZY JÓZEFOWICZ, ANDRZEJ SKOPIŃSKI

The residential estate Za Żelazną Bramą was the pride of the Gomułka regime. An architectural competition led to the selection of its design. The estate comprises 19 huge, 15-storey blocks of flats. Features of the buildings show the designer's effort to give them an unusual form. An alternating rhythm of windows and bright or grey façade segments give the tall walls a more spacy look. However, what looked as an original pattern on blueprints or a photo image and certainly makes an intriguing picture when seen from an airplane, can merely frighten the pedestrians down there with its enormous size, monotony, and boring expression. It is hard to believe that the area had been developed as densely as the ancient centre of Rome before World War II. In terms of its area, the Za Żelazną Bramą estate is the biggest group of residential high-risers built in the heart of Warsaw in a place where historical buildings stood before the war. The new development has completely obscured the original pattern of old streets. The blocks of flats were designed to accommodate about 25 thousand people.



In the final scene of comedy “Człowiek z M-3” (Man with an Apartment) directed by Leon Jeannot, the protagonist Dr Tomasz Piechocki (starring Bogumił Kobiela) visits the building site together with his newly-married wife. The camera shows the Za Żelazną Bramą blocks growing in the background on ul. Grzybowska.

“Our M3 apartment will be here two years from now,” the doctor says. “Two years, so soon?,” a pretty blonde in a pink dress says in a happy voice. Dr Piechocki urges the workers who were apparently having a break: “Eh, gentlemen, what is this? We have no time to waste



**Współczesny widok na osiedle Za Żelazną Bramą z Pałacu Kultury i Nauki. Widać, jak między blokami śródmiejskiej części wyrosły nowe budynki / The residential estate Za Żelazną Bramą as seen from the Palace of Culture and Science. New buildings, inserted between the downtown blocks, can be seen** FOT. WOJCIECH SURDZIEL / AGENCJA GAZETA

and you are having a beer!” The movie was shot in 1969. The construction of the estate was in its fourth year at that time and it continued for another three years.

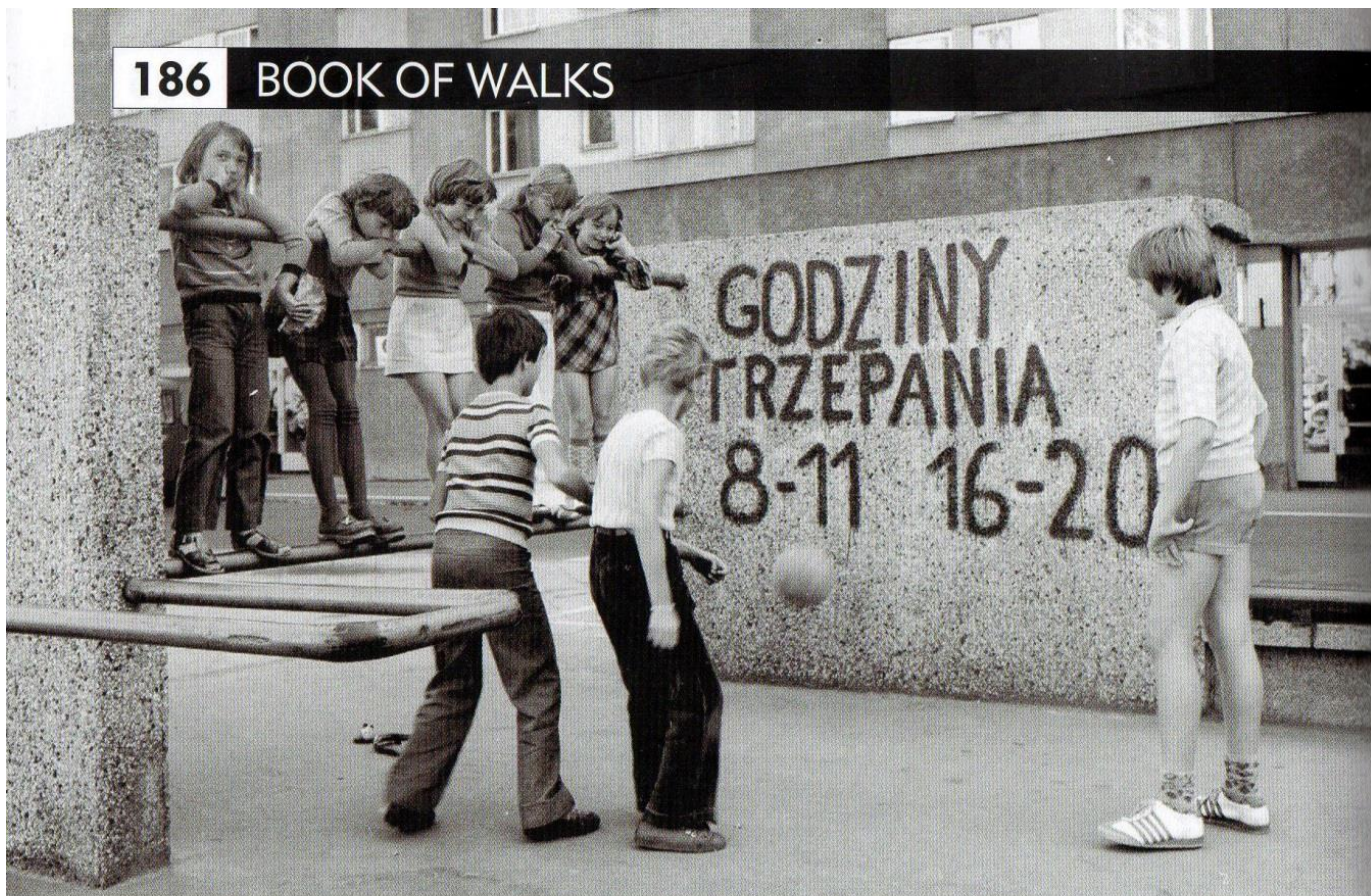
We will be brought again to the same place when the construction is finished, by the movie “Dzięcioł” (The

Woodpecker) directed by Jerzy Gruza. Stefan Waldek (starring Jerzy Gołas) strolls along a deserted ul. Grzybowska. He lives nearby in one of the 15-storey buildings. The mammoth houses, though quite new, already have their mysteries. Stefan Waldek keeps watching a never-ending bohemian party in a “next-door” building through his telescope.

### **GROUNDBREAKING MONOLITH**

“The competition-winning design was chosen for construction but, meanwhile, the times have changed and





**Podwórko przy ul. Pereca w latach 70.** / A backyard on ul. Pereca, the 1970s. The inscription on the carpet rail reads:  
Carpet beating hours 8-11, 16-20

FOT. HANNA MUSIAŁÓWNA / AGENCJA FORUM

blueprints were no longer hastily taken to construction sites without waiting for the ink on them to dry up. Life in the 1960s was running much slower and, sometimes, it was bogged in stagnation making the distance between blueprints and finished structures increasingly longer. This design was found good but they soon started to make improvements on it, add new structures to make it “denser,” and some other “hocus-pocus” continued over it for some more time. The construction kicked off eventually in 1965,” Lech Chmielewski wrote in the “Przewodnik warszawski (Warsaw Guidebook) and added that the construction works were done with a new method. The builders for the first time employed a technology called “stolica” (capital town) which is now known as the monolithic method of poured concrete.

“Concrete was poured into the boarding and when hardened, the boarding was moved upwards and every next storey was built in this way. The method was not quite that new. It was used for the construction of World War II bunkers. The builders worked three shifts. The river of concrete kept flowing on. In winter, they brought locomotives to produce steam and heat to allow continuous construction,” Chmielewski wrote.

### TOUGH LIFE

The buildings were hoped to distinguish themselves with their being very modern. They received fast, semi-automatic lifts made on a Swedish licence in Warsaw of the 1960s! Top of the world at the time. The ground level of the buildings was arranged into some shops and vast lobbies, a combination of a concierge office and a press store. An average flat in the *Za Żelazną Bramą* area is a two-room M3. Entrance doors to the flats run along an endless, hotel-like corridor. Inside, on one side of a tiny anteroom is a nano-kitchen and on the other—a bathroom of the same size. The kitchenette has no windows and the big room performs all the functions from a dining room, to the bedroom and everything else. There is a small “window” in the partition wall. That window was the most typical feature of flats *Za Żelazną Bramą*.

One of those apartments was shown in an episode of the TV series “Najważniejszy dzień życia” (The Most Important Day of Your Life) titled “Gra” (Game). Melania Kicała (Ryszarda Hanin) moves in the flat of her son-in-law Stefan Kozłowski (Jan Kociniak).

This flat was not exactly the same as those tiny M3s with a kitchenette but an M5 flat built to a little higher standard. There were only few such higher-standard flats in those buildings. The life in the neighbourhood was by no means easy in its first years. "Concrete walls were cold and damp. Central heating was badly designed and its workmanship was even worse, so it just did not work. Housing co-op administration would distribute electric heaters to frozen families because the central heating could not be repaired in a short time. And there were problems with water, not just the hot one. Even the sewage system did not work properly and its contents often poured out from the toilets on the floor instead of being disposed away to the municipal mains.

### ALUMINIUM MEANS PRESTIGE

According to plans, the Za Żelazną Bramą housing area was to be filled with well developed infrastructures. The plans were to build along ul. Marchlewskiego (now renamed ul. Jana Pawła II) a big shopping centre with department stores similar to those found nearby in what is called "Ściana Wschodnia" (The East Side). But the plans have never advanced beyond their initial phase and wind alone filled the empty space along ul. Marchlewskiego until the end of Communist Poland.

A lot of trees grew, like a little forest, on the eastern side of the area. "We planted them in rows to convert the desert between the blocks of flats into a garden. We did that in a place where you could not find a single tree before the War," says engineer Zbigniew Pakalski, one of the authors of the Za Żelazną Bramą estate who later lived in one of the buildings.

Afforestation of the area was rather successful and the space between buildings is nicely covered with a kind of park today.

The Main Office building of the ZSL Peasant Party was also built in the area at ul. Grzybowska 4. Years later, the party changed its name into PSL Peasant Party in 1989. The building was there before the blocks of flats were even constructed. At that time, the ZSL building was a high-tech one, looking like a cube clad in goldish aluminium panels. Aluminium used for construction purposes was in short supply and rationed, during the Gomulka era, therefore, this building looked very prestigious. Inside, it had a patio surrounded by café tables and a spacy canteen on the ground floor.

The building got deserted when the Peasant Party sold it to the Dom Development company for a price of PLN72 million in 2006. It was soon demolished and a huge apartment building with a bent façade running along the historical line of ul. Grzybowska was built in its place.

Criticism of the "mammoth wardrobes" as they called the Za Żelazną Bramą buildings kept intensifying among the population of architects as early as in the late 1960s. Architect Jan Bogusławski in 1969 complained about their being too huge, built into a "pseudo-symmetrical scale which dwarfed the neighbouring magnificent historical buildings."

An international competition for the revitalisation of the area was solved in 1986. Almost all architects would make the development denser by building new structures attached to the existing ones. This process started several years later after the Communist Poland was over.

### WHO CAN LIVE IN AN M3

People kept asking this question in Communist times. The mystery code M3 meant in the 1960s that it was a flat of two rooms, a kitchenette, and a bathroom altogether covering some 38 square metres. Housing construction was regulated by very strict norms from the late 1950s up to the very end of Communist Poland. This is why protagonist in the comedy "Man with an Apartment" who wants to move out from his mum's apartment, must quickly get married, otherwise he would never get his M3. An M3 flat would be allocated only to a family of three or to people who were considered as "married couples with a development potential." Unmarried couples had no chances for a flat and bachelors could not even dream of their own 38 square metres to live in. "But there are situations in which two people can get more living space than the norm provides. For example, a mother and daughter or her adult son. In such situations the authorities may use regulations applicable to exceptional cases," wrote the "Stolica" weekly in June 1968. Interestingly enough, the Man with an Apartment (M3) is reading the same press story on the screen.