

MARSZAŁKOWSKA DZIELNICA MIESZKANIOWA OR MDM (MARSZAŁKOWSKA RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT)

MDM, UL. MARSZAŁKOWSKA
AND PL. KONSTYTUCJI,

DESIGNED: SINCE 1950, **BUILT:** 1950-52,
ARCHITECTS: STANISŁAW JANKOWSKI,
JAN KNOTHE, JÓZEF SIGALIN,
ZYGMUNT STĘPIŃSKI ET AL.

Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa was one of the flagship residential projects in Poland in the early 1950s. By far and away it was intended as a showcase example of architecture of Socialist Realism and as an epitome of the new social policy. The whole thing was designed to give accommodation to new elites with working class roots.

The axis of this new urban plan was pl. Konstytucji mapped out along ul. Marszałkowska – in fact the only post-war Warsaw square designed end-to-end. Its axis from the south had been disrupted and shifted to one side to obstruct the view of The Saviour's Church on pl. Zbawiciela.

The square was lined by residential buildings with two-storeyed shops located on the colonnaded groundfloor. Mouths of two side streets were designed in gates.

The quite varied architecture of the individual buildings is enriched by Socialist Realist sculptural and architectural detail. In terms of city planning, scale and monumentalism, the project is inspired by Soviet design, yet the architectural detail is a variation on the theme of folk art. It also took its inspiration from Polish and European architectural heritage.

The Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa was built in the area that was the pre-war centre of the city with all its mesh of streets and buildings. This part of the city escaped total destruction during the Warsaw Rising, hence to build the MDM many houses had to be torn down.

NORMS AND OBLIGATIONS

The construction work took several years and we may trace the construction stages in the pages of a luxury album "MDM" of 1955, edited by Stanisław Jankowski. Jankowski was on the team of the district's designers, and was one of the three Cichociemni ("Silent and Unseen" - Polish Special Operations Executives SOE in WWII) who escaped persecution in the Stalinist day. This album creates a propaganda-style vision of the MDM's construction.

We may trace the construction process marked by a sequence of obligations undertaken to celebrate the anniversary of the October revolution, Bierut's name day etc. combined with overfulfillment of performance norms. And hence a glassworker Józef Gutowski exceeded a norm by 510 per cent, and scored Poland's record in glazing, and a wall-painter Mieczysław Malinowski overfulfilled a plan in painting by 610 per cent.

The MDM was opened on July 22, 1952. There was everything: a parade, athletes, children, balloons, speeches, militia in white uniforms, pioneers of the fraternal People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, banners, delegates from Silesia and the Nowa Huta (steelworks of Cracow). President Bierut greeted the parading crowd from a saluting platform set up on pl. Konstytucji, and the square itself received its name from the Stalinist constitution adopted on that day. After the official ceremony the square was teeming with curious Varsovians. "Crowds passed by in rapture, stopped, ran forward and returned again to disappear inside the fresh-paint-smelling shops. Heads perked up and eyes counted the ornate street lights, building storeys, and window glazes", wrote a reader of the "Express Wieczorny" daily.

"No detail has been forgotten - there are signposts, balustrades... The long and the short of it: socialism builds differently than capitalism", argued Andrzej Wasilewski in the columns of "Nowa Kultura", a newspaper of the communist party.



Otwarcie MDM-u w ósmą rocznicę powstania PRL-u, 22 lipca 1952 r.

Opening ceremony of the MDM residential district on the eighth anniversary of People's Poland, 22 July 1952

FOT. CAF / PAP

The reality was not so rosy to say the least. The finishing work took as long as until late 1953. Varsovians hardly agreed with the bombastic reviews of the MDM spread by communist propaganda. Andrzej Jabłoński in his unpublished “Kalejdoskop warszawski” written after he fled Poland in 1954 (a fragment of the manuscript is quoted below by courtesy of Mrs Jolanta Klimowicz-Osmańczyk) argued that the MDM’s architecture, though urban to the bone, is nowhere near Warsaw’s tradition.

“It is a new, alien and different town. Inasmuch as Krakowskie Przedmieście, Nowy Świat or the Old Town remind us of the pre-war Warsaw, or in so far as we may agree with the Trasa W-Z expressway, still we wish to state most emphatically that the new image of Marszałkowska bears no resemblance to the old capital whatsoever. (...) What we see is sealed with the stamp of Soviet architecture for good”, he wrote.

ORNATE LAMP POSTS, MOSAICS, WREATHS

The heart of the MDM has always been pl. Konstytucji. Its southern perspective is closed off by the MDM hotel that opened on the same day as the square. Towards late 1950s large neon signs shone on the roof tops. Today ads change often, but in the People’s Poland day the same three signs glowed for three decades: LOT, KLM and Zeiss. It was here in 1960 that Andrzej Wajda took the shots for first scene of “Innocent sorcerers”. In the background we shall see the MDM hotel with the then lonely neon sign “Podróżuj Lotem” (Fly LOT).

The southern part of the square was decorated with three Socialist Realist lamp posts. A mosaic reading MDM and 1952 was inserted in the sidewalk next to the arcaded building at pl. Konstytucji 6.

The gable walls of buildings at pl. Konstytucji 5 and 6 are embellished with cast iron wreaths. Paradoxical



cally, this detail attached to buildings that epitomize Socialist Realism is modelled after an “aristocratic-bourgeois” house belonging to counts Krasieński on pl. Małachowskiego that was built in the early 20th century. There are ample details inspired by folk art, and the flat window frames resemble the works of both a 19th century Warsaw architect Franciszek Maria Lanci and the German architect, Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

FLATS ARE LARGE

Interestingly, the MDM flats were praised by many. “According to our information the flats are very decently furnished, better by far than in other standard residential estates. Moreover, the novelty is that they are multi-

room up to even five or six rooms. A flat allotment is not denied to employees of state-run institutions provided they have a big enough family to meet the conditions of the lodging authorities. One more thing, however. The rent is extremely high. It reaches 400 and 500 zloties. The average salary in Warsaw amounts to around 1,000 zloties”, noted Jabłoński.

The MDM was the first post-war residential estate offering flats of higher quality, recalled a building engineer Zbigniew Pakalski. As he told, the flooring was made of oak parquet, and not spruce parquet. The walls in kitchens and bathrooms were tiled up to 1.4 metre above the floor. The corridors were furnished with wardrobes, and in kitchens cast iron sink units were installed.

LOBSTERS IN RARYTAS, MINCED MEAT ROAST IN SALUS

In People’s Poland day, bars, restaurants, and cafés virtually dotted the district.

The ground floor at ul. Marszałkowska 10/18 contained a popular café Świtezianka, a local hangout for newspaper reporters from the nearby “Życie Warszawy” daily and “Stolica” weekly. It was here, in the early 1950s, that Marek Nowakowski met a draughtsman and cartoonist Julian Żebrowski. “He knew everyone in Warsaw, from craftsmen and merchants to literati, artists and actors. (...) He told me a lot about pre-war morning and evening newspapers, red newspapers and others. (...) I met his colleagues, stately, bald or greying men. They were boys of the Warsaw Rising”, recounts Nowakowski in the book “Nekropolis”.

A 1950s place, still in operation, is the milk bar Prasowy located in this part of ul. Marszałkowska. Its interior walls are lined with panels made of black glass. The Marszałkowska 15/17 building housed Rarytas, the most luxurious Warsaw restaurant in the Stalinist day. Its description authored by Andrzej Jabłoński dates from 1953. Examples of menu items included crayfish soup, lobsters and asparagus. The shelves were lined with French cognacs and liqueurs.

The prices, however, were huge. Patrons were largely top regime apparatchiks. “They say that

it is a restaurant for officials, ranging from ministerial directors all the way to the top”, wrote Jabłoński. The next Socialist Realist building at ul. Marszałkowska 21/26 housed a longtime restaurant Cristal Budapest serving Hungarian cuisine. Today, the former Cristal contains an office of the Institute of National Remembrance. From 1950s until the end of People’s Poland the ground floor of the building at ul. Marszałkowska 28a was occupied by an alcohol-free, diet restaurant Salus. Warsaw’s pauperized intelligentsia used to dine there. There were only two or three prix-fixe meals to choose from.

The price range was 6 – 8 zloties. “The two-course meal consists of soup and the main course. The main course does not consist of meat and potatoes, but of potatoes and meat with a small side of root vegetables. The meat portion is microscopic indeed. The standard fare includes minced meat chops, filled cabbage or minced meat roast proudly named ‘Roman pork roast’.

On official non-meat days [in People’s Poland that day was usually Monday] the portion of meat is replaced by pan-fried cod”, wrote Andrzej Jabłoński. Today this unit contains a shoe shop.