
SOCIALIST REALIST HERITAGE IN POLAND – SUCCESSES IN PROTECTION AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT: The debate on the protection of Socialist Realist heritage has been ongoing since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Initially, the greatest challenge was to develop appropriate criteria for assessment, to ensure effective protection, and to transform public awareness. With increasing temporal distance, attitudes toward Socialist Realism have evolved, particularly in the context of research and heritage evaluation. This shift has been reflected both within professional circles - among heritage conservators and art historians - and, eventually, within the broader public. As a result, the most significant buildings have been listed as monuments (although some spectacular demolitions have occurred), and their public perception has become more positive. Nevertheless, evaluation remains a major challenge, as it is often intuitive and imprecise - a problem already noted in earlier scholarship, together with the need to address new challenges arising from contemporary conditions [Szymgin, 2012: 5].

Moreover, new issues and challenges concerning Socialist Realist heritage are emerging today. The dynamic transformations of modern cities make it necessary to open a new chapter in the discussion. We propose drawing attention to the problem of greenery - its maintenance and the inappropriate landscaping of squares and urban axes; the problem of parking lots (e.g., Constitution Square); the loss and degradation of architectural detail (retaining walls, coffered ceilings in arcades, sgraffito decorations); the disintegration of the urban fabric; insufficient cooperation between conservation services, municipal authorities, and urban greenery management.

KEY WORDS: Socialist Realism, heritage, protection

Introduction

Socialist Realism is a specific cultural phenomenon, affecting various fields and levels, many years after its so-called "defeat." Despite the significant temporal distance (over 70 years), it still generates emotions and can become a tool of political manipulation (e.g., the debate over "demolishing the Palace of Culture and Science"). It is included in many different narratives, which often distort the image of the architecture of that period. These issues complicate conservation efforts and influence the valorization and assessment of cultural heritage.

The simplified and non-multidimensional perception of Socialist Realist architecture was strongly influenced by political narratives. However, architecture is always a matter of politics. As Deyan Sudjic argues the political character of a building does not stem from its form alone (Sudjic, 2015, 21). Rather, it emerges from the relationship between architecture and power, shaped by the building's function, the intentions behind its construction, and the socio-political context in which it was created. Andrew Demshuk remarks:

"Ideology and aesthetics are broad terms often impossible to disentangle. A landmark vested with extreme socio-political significance could lose all meaning in the next era. Yesterday's monstrosity could later be lauded as beautiful. And just as the reigning ideology need not prompt every demolition or drive for reconstruction, presumed ideological imperatives can take a backseat to perceived aesthetic and practical demands". (Demshuk, 2016, 45)

Today, with the increasing temporal distance, attitudes toward Socialist Realism have shifted, particularly in the context of research and heritage assessment. A broadened methodological perspective and in-depth study allow for a more complete analysis of the complex post-war reality (Compare: Zaremba, 2012), especially during the years 1949–1956. Situating monuments in a broader context can help to avoid oversimplifications and better understand the nature of the complex Socialist Realist heritage.

Although the style was imposed, its architectural realization in Central and Eastern Europe was carried out by local architects (with the exception of the Palace of Culture and Science, whose interiors were nonetheless designed by Polish architects and designers). Architects, rooted in pre-war practices, either personally or through the staff they trained, provided tools for interpreting the imposed style, which resulted in many interesting solutions. The architecture produced during this period is varied and diverse—ranging from monumental buildings of political significance, which are the best known and sometimes the most controversial today, to structures serving pragmatic (though still political) functions, such as cultural centers, theaters, and typical housing estates.

Heritage encompasses both monumental structures and smaller-scale realizations, as well as urban layouts, architectural interiors, parks, and green spaces. Initially, there was strong reluctance toward the legacy of Socialist Realism; however, over time, and with growing historical distance, a gradual process of recognizing its value has taken place.

In 2011, the conservation community emphasized that

“the recording of listed buildings, and the preservation and conservation of model examples of post-war architecture are important tasks facing city councils and conservation institutions [...]” (MDM/KMA, 2011, 5)

At that time, it was argued that the emergence of an appropriate temporal distance had facilitated recognition of the urban and architectural heritage of Socialist Realism. This shift has been reflected both within professional circles—among heritage conservators and art historians—and, eventually, within the broader public. Nevertheless, evaluation remains a significant challenge, as it is often intuitive and imprecise, a problem already noted in earlier scholarship, alongside the need to address new challenges posed by contemporary conditions. (Szymgin, 2012)

The transformations of the contemporary world were recognized as one of the key factors threatening heritage as early as the 1970s. These challenges are constantly evolving, but those particularly evident in the case of Socialist Realist heritage include the management of green spaces (often poorly maintained or improperly altered), increasing building density, the excessive presence of automobiles in historic squares or housing estates, and the decay of architectural details

Changing Perspectives Toward Socialist Realist Architecture in Poland

The growing temporal distance means that Socialist Realist culture, art, and architecture, or more broadly Stalinist architecture, now have a long research tradition and a multitude of established interpretive models. However, the historiography has been strongly conditioned by political circumstances. Changing political contexts significantly influenced the research, playing a decisive role both during the thaw and immediately after the political transformation in 1989. Dominant perspectives and narratives—mostly historical—have tended to revolve around the political, ideological, or aesthetic aspects of the 1950s.

In the context of heritage conservation, three main approaches to Socialist Realism can be identified:

- A narrative of rejection, which treats architecture primarily as a political instrument and often excludes it from heritage protection;
- An approach focusing on architectural style and formal qualities, which reinterprets Socialist Realism mainly in aesthetic terms;
- A more recent, contextual perspective, which understands Socialist Realism as a complex and diversified cultural phenomenon, allowing for more nuanced heritage assessments.

The first wave of critical reevaluations of Socialist Realism appeared during the thaw. For almost two decades afterward, however, this phenomenon was largely excluded from critical discourse. The earliest attempts to analyze Socialist Realism in historical and artistic terms took place in the late 1970s and 1980s, with renewed scholarly interest emerging only at the beginning of the 21st century. (Włodarczyk, 1986; Baraniewski, 1996; Stefański, 1982)

Most often, the art and architecture of 1949–1956 in Central and Eastern Europe has been interpreted within a totalitarian context, invoking concepts such as propaganda, persuasion, and social engineering. Interpretations tended to focus on practices, institutionalization, doctrinal categories, and oppressiveness, establishing a strong link between society and power. In this perspective, Socialist Realism appeared to be an artificial creation, produced by the authorities for the sake of authority.

It is difficult to dispute the thesis concerning the instrumentalization and politicization of art during the period of Socialist Realism. However, we cannot reduce the artistic practices of the time solely to political manipulation. Other perspectives emphasized the formal qualities of architecture, which became particularly relevant as discussions intensified regarding the need to protect buildings from the first half of the 1950s. Seminars and conservation meetings were organized to develop principles for assessing Socialist Realist heritage. (Szymgin&Haspel, 2010) This focus on form and the reinterpretation of the intrinsic architectural value was closely linked to the practical necessity of preservation and contributed to growing scholarly and professional interest. As a result, numerous publications, studies, and documentation efforts were undertaken. However, attention was primarily directed toward monumental buildings, large housing complexes, and public structures with distinctive forms or scales.

Discussions regarding the assessment of Socialist Realist architecture provided a real impetus for its protection, contributed to the redefinition of heritage from this period, and drew attention to its creators and architects. The architect, as a social actor, became a key figure in understanding the complex and varied negotiations within the sphere of ideas and forms. Although Socialist Realism was an imposed style, it was realized by professional architects, who, while obliged to comply with the doctrine, attempted to make their work as individual and original as possible within those constraints.

An anthropological approach has become increasingly important, exemplified by the works of Katerina Clark (Clark, 2003) and Sheila Fitzpatrick (Fitzpatrick, 1999). These studies emphasized bottom-up, rather than solely top-down analyses. This issue recognizing the participation of Polish society in the post-war social revolution was explored by Padraic Kenney (Kenney, 1997). Research aimed at embedding buildings within social space also emerged (Murawski, 2015; Lewbow, 2013). The bottom-up perspective encourages diverse interpretations of Socialist Realist heritage.

Today, we approach Socialist Realism from a broader perspective—not only as a political tool or in terms of style, but also within the context of modernization (Compare: Sumorok&Załoski, 2017). The modernization perspective allows us to analyze Socialist Realism as an attempt to create a modern socialist culture, interconnected with multiple aspects of post-war modernization—political, economic, social, institutional. For example, the Palace of Culture functioned as a tool of modernization, serving various social purposes; its impact varied, from the Warsaw Palace of Culture to its counterparts in Świętochłowice or less developed areas.

These new approaches and perspectives enable us to recognize the paradoxes and multidimensional challenges inherent in Socialist Realist heritage, allowing it to be treated as a historical heritage, rather than simply a “difficult” one.

Socialist Realist Heritage: Successes and Challenges in Protection

Today, Socialist Realism is recognized as a historical legacy. Just as research perspectives on Socialist Realism have evolved over the years, the rationale for conserving Socialist Realist heritage in Poland has also changed.

Attitudes toward Socialist Realist heritage were certainly politically conditioned. Discussions regarding monumental Stalinist buildings in Poland were often politically charged; however, debates over the demolition of the Palace of Culture and Science were more symbolic gestures than concrete actions, and did not necessarily reflect broader social interests. Politics was not the only factor shaping the evaluation and perception of Socialist architecture. These attitudes also depend on generational perspectives, educational background, historical awareness, and knowledge.

This issue is clearly illustrated by the history and timing of entries into the register of monuments, which reflect shifting perspectives, key moments coinciding with changes in research approaches, and the significance attributed to individual components. The first buildings from this period were included in the register of monuments in the 1970s, primarily monumental structures or complex ensembles with significant social and political importance. These included buildings such as the Parliament (1973), the Great Theatre in Łódź (1976) and the Palace of Culture in Dąbrowa Górnicza (1979).

The majority of entries, however, were made after 2000, with only a few exceptions from the 1990s, such as the Party House (1996) and the Bank (1993), both in Białystok.

A key moment in changing the perception of Socialist Realist heritage was the inclusion of Nowa Huta on the heritage register. In 2004, the urban layout of Nowa Huta was officially designated as a monument, a decision that was very positively received. This outcome was the result of the initiative of many individuals, including activists, conservators, architects, and art historians such as Juchnowicz, Miezan and Komorowski. Around the same time—or even earlier—research and promotion of Nowa Huta had already begun. In 2005, the Museum of the History of Nowa Huta, a branch of the Museum of Kraków was opened. Over 30 exhibitions have been presented there. The museum branch has conducted research, developed and disseminated information about Nowa Huta from its prehistory to the present day, published both scholarly and popular works on its history, and carried out educational activities as part of the Muzeum Rozproszone project (Dispersed Museum). (Sibila, 2007)

In 2007, the Palace of Culture and Science became a listed monument, representing perhaps the only controversial and highly emotional entry from this period. According to the Committee of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Palace does not possess values justifying its recognition as a legally protected monument. Nevertheless, it was added to the register of protected monuments.

After 2010, a greater number of Socialist Realist structures were entered into the heritage register, although the most spectacular and monumental realizations had to wait more than ten years. Subsequent entries illustrate the ongoing recognition of Socialist Realist heritage. In 2009, the Mariensztat housing estate was added to the register, followed by the Tram Terminus in Łódź (Fig.

1) and the Youth Palace in Katowice in 2010. In 2012, the Maritime House of Culture in Gdańsk-Nowy Port and, in 2013, the astronomical observatory and planetarium in Chorzów were included.



Fig. 1. Tram Terminus, Łódź, 1951, photo: A. Sumorok

These buildings were generally well received by local communities and were not controversial. However, these were not “systematic” entries; rather, they resulted from multiple factors that were often seemingly arbitrary. As early as 2012, Bogusław Szmygin drew attention to the problem of assessing and valuing architectural heritage, emphasizing that although numerous proposals for monument valorization had been developed, none had been formally adopted or implemented. Consequently, the application of the concept of value remains largely intuitive and inconsistent, a condition clearly evident in the listing practices concerning Socialist Realist buildings. (Szmygin, 2012, 5)

Notably, a significant number of new entries into the national heritage register have been made since 2015, indicating a growing recognition of these sites’ cultural value. In 2017, the Voivodeship Office in Rzeszów and in 2019, the administrative building in Nowa Huta were officially designated as monuments, signalling the institutional acknowledgment of their historical and architectural significance.

An illustration of the dynamic nature of heritage recognition in practice is the case of the Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa (MDM) (Marszałkowska Housing Estate) in Warsaw. Previously, there were two attempts to enter the MDM into the register, both of which were blocked, among other reasons, by complaints from housing communities, after which the Ministry of Culture overturned the decisions. Only on the third attempt did the ministry confirm the entry as correct, without requiring additional documentation. This example highlights that

the recognition of Socialist Realist heritage values is often a lengthy and contentious process, requiring both a critical assessment of significance and dialogue among multiple stakeholders.

Many buildings and sites, however, still await such decisions and re-evaluations. A notable case is Lodz, which has been relatively quick to register smaller post-1950s buildings (e.g., the Tram Terminus). However, the most important Socialist Realist square of that period—the historic Old Town Square—is still not listed as a national monument.

Many significant or iconic buildings from the early 1950s, such as the Leningrad Cinema in Gdańsk or the 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw, have disappeared entirely, while others, such as the Tourist House in Zakopane, were substantially rebuilt, losing much of their original character. Even those that have been successfully listed are often in a precarious state of preservation; for example, the Maritime House of Culture in Gdańsk illustrates the ongoing challenges in maintaining the material integrity and historical authenticity of registered Socialist Realist sites (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Maritime Culture House, Gdańsk, 1955, photo: Artur Andrzej, CC0 1.0, wikiedia.pl, accessed: 16.01.2026

Sometimes, awareness and knowledge alone are sufficient to appreciate and protect the value of Socialist Realist heritage, particularly in the case of interiors, which are often not covered by entries that protect only the external structure.

Contemporary approaches to cultural heritage recognize that it consists of specific and diverse material entities—individual buildings, architectural ensembles, and urban structures—yet it cannot be reduced to physical fabric alone. Heritage is equally embedded in social processes, collective memory, identity formation, and practices of interpretation. As such, it is not a fixed or given category, but rather a field shaped by ongoing societal negotiation in response to the challenges and values of the present.

As Jacek Purchla argues, heritage should be understood as a dynamic process, reflecting both society's relationship to systems of value and the continual reinterpretation of the past. (Purchla, 2011) This perspective has significant implications for the evaluation and protection of heritage, including Socialist Realist heritage, which cannot be approached solely as a material legacy. Instead, its significance emerges through social reception, acceptance, reinterpretation, and research perspectives. In this sense, even contested or "difficult" heritage may, through processes of social choice and cultural negotiation, be transformed into a recognized cultural value - a process that has also characterized the reassessment of Socialist Realist architecture.

However, the need for critical and methodologically grounded assessment of Socialist Realist heritage is further reinforced when heritage values are confronted with contemporary urban and environmental challenges. Issues such as the management of green spaces, the densification of historic housing estates, and the growing pressure of automobile traffic directly affect both the material integrity and the perceived significance of these sites.

In many Socialist Realist housing estates, green areas were conceived as integral elements of the original spatial and social concept. Their reduction, fragmentation, or redevelopment not only alters the physical structure of these environments but also undermines their historical and social meaning.

New challenges in Protection of the Socialist Realist Heritage

Today, new challenges and problems are emerging, especially in Socialist Realist housing estates. These are diverse complexes of varying scale, value, and needs. This architecture includes: monumental, central, "historical style" residential districts in big cities (e.g., Warsaw's MDM, Gdańsk's GDM, and the Old Town Market Square in Lodz); typical housing estates in large cities; and completely new towns, like Nowa Huta - an example of new urban creation. These urban spaces are vibrant residential structures and often key elements of city centers. The dynamic transformations of modern cities and new environmental challenges (combating climate change, etc.) are forcing opening of a new chapter in this discussion.

Key areas requiring consideration and consideration include greenery, adapting residential spaces to new functions and the demands of modernity. As a result, historical spaces of this era often face a number of challenges related to increased building density and increased vehicular traffic. These problems are either not addressed adequately (cars) or are addressed without respect for previous spatial and architectural concepts (axis distortions, loss of detail).

1. Greenery and its maintenance

– *Nowa Huta (Cracow)*

Nowa Huta was originally designed as a *garden city*, with wide tree-lined avenues, parks, and green belts between housing blocks. However, in recent decades, many of these green areas have fallen into neglect. The former flagship investment of the Polish People's Republic, at the dawn of capitalist Poland, became more or less simply a housing estate. Along with the "unwanted ideological legacy" of the previous era. Today, greenery is often poorly maintained – overgrown lawns, self-seeding plants, untidy hedges, a lack of funds for regular mowing and planting, in

some places. “Wild meadows” have appeared, which is an ecologically positive trend, but not always compatible with the district’s historic, representative character.

The situation improved somewhat after the entire area was placed under conservation protection in 2004. As Komorowski writes:

“The 2004 decision imposed protection over the layout of streets, squares, lawns, location, solid and size construction, architectural and landscape interior design, and designed green areas. Investments causing devastation of the cultural landscape have been suspended. Still, there continues a process of natural destruction being the consequence of omissions or negligence, as in the case of an essential component of the urban space, which is green. Neglected – both the designed and planted spontaneously and without consent – it introduces chaos in land use of public squares, and residential interiors, thus harming perception of urban planning and often threatening the health of residence. Here the element took control over classical restraint, almost like in the Ruskin concept of Romanticism”. (Komorowski, 2017)

An attempt to sort out the issue of greenery is the project “Cracow Greenway East” - a concept of a greenery system integrating parks in Nowa Huta. It points out the problem of fragmentation of greenery, barriers and lack of continuity. As the author of the plan writes:

„The aim of the project is to develop a green area system concept that would integrate linear green spaces into selected parks in Nowa Huta. Currently these parks are isolated from each other by various barriers which disturb communication and natural continuity. The project is a refinement of the strategic document which is the Directions of development and management of green areas in Cracow for 2017-2030. It undertakes an attempt to implement the recommendations and guidelines contained in the strategy regarding the development and cultivation of green corridors in the eastern part of Cracow.” (Smolarczyk, 2019)

- *Inappropriate greening – Old Market Square (Lodz)*

Laid out in the 15th century and constituting the historical core of Lodz, the Old Market Square (Stary Rynek) fell within the Litzmannstadt Ghetto during World War II. It was rebuilt after the war in the Socialist Realism style. The architecture of the arcaded tenement houses evokes the architecture of a Renaissance Polish town. Despite being made aesthetically more attractive, the market square never became a lively, vibrant place. Seeking to revitalize the area, city officials decided to change and remodel the square and the adjacent park complex. This park was created on the site of the demolished ghetto buildings. The revitalization was carried out between 2022 and 2024. As a result, the square gained a new granite surface, trees, street furniture, and decorative roofs to protect local commercial initiatives from the different weather conditions. Unfortunately, this revitalisation of Lodz’s Old Market Square has often been criticised for excessive paving or unsuccessful attempts to “green” the space. Scattered potted plants or small islands of greenery surrounded by large, paved surfaces do not contribute to improving the microclimate or providing shade. Critical voices can be heard from both residents and the press, writing not only about

the dominant concrete, but also about the harmful impact of revitalization on the adjacent old trees planted after World War II (Szlachetka, 2025). As you might imagine, this has not affected the development of the area, which remains off the beaten track from the city's main street, Piotrkowska, and the nearby „Manufaktura” - shopping and cultural center. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Inappropriate greening – Old Market Square, Łódź, photo: Ł. M. Sadowski, 2026

2. A growing number of cars. The problem of parking lots in city squares. The case of Konstytucji Square in Warsaw

Communist-era planners didn't anticipate such a drastic increase in the number of cars. At that time, cars were a luxury, reserved for a select few. The opinion of decision-makers such as the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) was symptomatic:

*"He was a very unsophisticated man who believed that the working class should travel by train and bus. For Władysław Gomułka, a car for an ordinary worker was unthinkable."*¹

Modern times, and the realities of changing the free market system, have revealed the anachronism of such thinking. An excellent example is Konstytucji Square in Warsaw. A monumental Socialist Realist square, originally designed for pedestrians, parades, and public gatherings. Currently

¹ <https://jedynka.polskieradio.pl/artykul/1259362,Gdyby-Gomu%C5%82ka-nie-zosta%C5%82-odsuni%C4%99ty-od-w%C5%82adzy-nie-mieliby%C5%9Bmy-maluch%C3%B3w>, (accessed: 15.01.2026).

much of the square now functions as a parking lot, completely altering its perception. The central part of the square, today a parking island in one of the most representative urban interiors of the capital. Cars dominate the space, limiting accessibility for pedestrians and cyclists. This is another example of the untapped potential of an urban space designed over 70 years ago. From time to time, voices of social activists and city activists are heard calling for the trees to be planted and used as a place of entertainment and relaxation (cafes, marketplaces). (Kępiński, 2023) (Fig.4)



Fig. 4. Parking lot at Konstytucji Square, Warsaw, photo Emptywords, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikipedia.pl, accessed: 12.01.2026

3. The problem of increasing the urban density

The period of Socialist Realism allowed for experiments with creating new values (designing new housing estates), as well as the reconstruction and demolition of dense pre-war buildings. Even in the interwar period, calls were made for letting in light and sunlight. For example, Lodz, through its rapid and chaotic expansion, was criticized as, on the one hand,

"the degeneration of the urban unit that is the apartment and the house, and on the other, an equally advanced degeneration of the entire city organism." (Tołwiński, 1937, 82)

Due to the modern, contemporary tendencies of the postwar period, districts (such as Nowa Huta or central Lodz estates) were originally planned with open spaces between buildings – for greenery, playgrounds, and public services. These areas, of course, were not intended for development. They were intended to serve as a "reserve" of greenery.

In recent years, after the change of the system and the renewed dominance of private property, this "reserved" areas has become endangered. Currently, new buildings are being built in these areas with increasing frequency (apartment blocks, commercial buildings, multi-story parking lots). This is, of course, due to the inadequacy of urban planning from 6-7 decades ago to the needs of a modern city (as case of the aforementioned increase in car ownership and the creation of new parking lots). This leads to further negative consequences for urban architecture: loss of the visual axis, ventilation corridors and transparency of the composition. The entire idea of the systems designed by architects is often irreversibly erased.

4. The problem of losses and degradation of detail (retaining walls, coffered ceilings in arcades, sgraffitos)

The problems of blurring and destroying Socialist Realist layouts, compositions, and green areas are linked to the problem of destroying details. The Polish version of Socialist Realism was not as richly decorated as its Soviet counterpart. However, detail played a very important role. Visual artists, sculptors, and others were involved in the construction of the structures. Unfortunately, the artistic value of detail is not understood by contemporary decision-makers. Particularly damaging is the trend of insulating buildings with polystyrene, which has been prevalent in Poland since the early 20th century. As part of these modernizations, a great deal of valuable detail has been destroyed. Decorative elements such as sgraffitos, cornices, and mouldings are often destroyed during thermal insulation works (covered by layers of styrofoam).

In addition to the insulation of buildings, there is also the usual deterioration and destruction of detail. A sad example is the degradation of the sgraffito decorations on apartment blocks in Łódź's Old Town (Podrzeczna Street). (Fig. 5) Despite appeals from community activists, art historians, and the media, they continue to deteriorate. A local television station even published a plea for their rescue in 2023. As the author of the short text wrote:

"They are harmed not only by acidification of rainwater, but above all by mindless destruction and the lack of commitment from the city authorities to save them. And we need to hurry, because with each passing month, the plasterwork is increasingly degrading, and larger and larger fragments of the paintings are crumbling irreversibly." (Kowal, 2023)

As of the end of 2025, nothing has improved. Earlier, in 2018, the sgraffito on the front facade of the Łódź Ballet School was scandalously hacked off and destroyed by insulation. A bit of optimism in this situation comes from the fact that, following protests from residents (a petition signed by over 1,100 internet users), the Ministry of Culture has committed to at least partially restoring them. (Bujalski, 2018; Kałach, 2018)

In addition to artistic decoration, simple elements are being also destroyed. In the Doły Zachód housing estate in Łódź, original retaining walls, imitating the Cyclopean wall pattern, have been replaced with smooth, plastered surfaces. Unfortunately, elements have been damaged (again!) in the cultural institution of the district library. Other examples of degradation are and old passageways are decaying or hidden behind advertisements.



Fig. 5. Degradation of the sgraffito decorations on apartment blocks in Lodz's Old Town, photo: Ł. M. Sadowski, 2026

This type of "modernization" has also affected the seemingly protected Nowa Huta area in Krakow. Socialist Realist decorative elements (sculptures, balustrades, street lamps) are being replaced with inexpensive, modern substitutes.

The examples provided here are among the most spectacular, but such harmful actions are being undertaken in many cities across Poland. Despite improvements, there is still a lack of awareness of the craftsmanship and identifying value of architectural detail.

5. The problem of disintegration of the urban fabric (lack of services, ill-considered functions)

Once again, the Old Town in Lodz is a good example. Political changes and new economic conditions have led to changes in this part of the city. The development of the aforementioned shopping malls nearby and the new cultural and service center "Manufaktura" have led to an outflow of businesses from this district. It has lost its service and social functions. The authorities are trying to revitalize this part of the city. So far, these attempts have been insufficient. In most historic cities, the Market Square is the main, vibrant square. In Lodz, a paradox has emerged. The Market Square and Old Town are empty, while the square in the middle of the nearby shopping center has begun to be called the market square by locals. Many ground floor spaces remain empty, and there is little life in the square and adjacent streets.

The problem seems to be a lack of or insufficient cooperation between environmental protection services, the city, the greenery management, etc. This is causing problems for business and restaurant owners. One of them, towards the end of the renovation of the Old Market Square, said in an interview with the local press:

"In my opinion, the Old Market Square hasn't been finished. There's a lot of shoddy work. A beer garden should have been built on the side of the Old Town Park. The part of the park designated for the restaurant hasn't been touched at all. Yesterday they were hastily filling in the holes there. And yet, it is city property. I think the renovation should be done comprehensively, not superficially". (Grześkowiak, 2024)

As a result we deal with fragmentation of the urban fabric, not a living organism. The absence of a coherent functional policy leads to both spatial and social degradation. The examples given here are primarily from our city, Łódź. It's worth remembering that this problem applies to all cities with Socialist Realism architecture.

Klaus Lingebauer best summarized this in his text on Berlin. He focused on greenery, presented theses and conclusions that offer suggestions for solving the problems:

"– Inappropriate and inadequate maintenance creates problems for the plantations of the facilities, which in some cases leads to over-shaping and the development of nature conservation claims with corresponding conflicts.

Care-intensive parts of the plantings, such as hedges, alternating plantings, roses, tub plants, etc. are sometimes reduced, abandoned or replaced by plants that are easier to maintain. [...]

– Citizens' wishes and citizens' initiatives play an increasingly important role in maintaining the facilities, both as a support and as an obstacle (protests against the felling of trees necessary for the preservation of garden monuments).

– Competitions for post-war modernist facilities lead to redesign demands with difficult planning, coordination and approval processes and, as a result, to the loss of original substance". (Lingebauer, 2020).

Conclusions

The assessment of Socialist Realist heritage becomes not only necessary but unavoidable. Such assessment must be undertaken with an awareness of the changing meanings and interpretations of this heritage, requiring the development of appropriate and context-sensitive methodologies capable of addressing both its material and symbolic dimensions. Purchla concludes

"our attitude to the past is no longer rooted in pietism towards monuments; today it is shaped by a culture of memory as a system of collective memory of society." (Purchla, 2021, 9)

Consequently, heritage protection is no longer limited to traditional conservation practices but must respond to new challenges, including social contestation, shifting memory regimes, and contemporary modes of use and reinterpretation. In this sense, protection becomes an active process of negotiation between past and present, rather than a purely technical exercise.

Szmygin argues that the contemporary understanding of the concept of a monument (heritage asset) remains insufficiently defined and conceptually ambiguous. This lack of clarity is reflected in the inclusion of Socialist Realist buildings in heritage registers, where the criteria for listing often appear inconsistent or arbitrary. There is therefore a pressing need to establish clearly articulated and methodologically coherent principles for the protection of Socialist Realist heritage. Such principles should be transparent, socially comprehensible, and acceptable to both the wider public and policy-makers. Moreover, they must extend beyond considerations of aesthetic value and address the specific material, political, and socio-cultural challenges inherent in the conservation and management of Socialist Realist architecture.

Author Contributions

The authors were equally involved in the creation and writing of the text.

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