

# Residential districts of the socialist realism period in Poland (1949–1956). Analysis, comparison and protection

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes four residential districts from the period of Socialist Realism in Poland: Marszałkowska Residential District in Warsaw, Kościuszkowska Residential District in Wrocław, residential Nowa Huta in Cracow and Downtown Residential District in Szczecin. These districts are analyzed in terms of urban layout, architectural forms, building intensity, and green areas. Common features of these housing complexes, characteristic for socialist realism architecture in Poland, were also examined. The authors also consider the protective methods of individual housing complexes. Each of the examined residential districts is considered in two aspects – the urban layout and architecture as well as the form of protection and its condition of the present day. For each analyzed housing complex, a map was prepared showing the scale of the urban layout and the percentage share of pre-war buildings, buildings from the period under study, and buildings erected in later years.

**Keywords:** residential architecture, socialist realism architecture, socialist realism urban planning, polish socialist realism, residential urban planning, post war architecture

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## Introduction

After World War II, a new style of architecture was created in the countries dependent on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as a result of communist ideas. It was called socialist realism, and was based on Soviet architecture. Architectural and urban projects in the countries of Eastern Europe were subordinated to political ideology, but also to the means of its implementation. The leaders of the camp countries of the so-called "people's democracy" were aware of this. The ideology of the communist party was realized through new forms of architecture and urban planning implemented in many war-ravaged and newly-built cities. The features of this architecture and urban solutions were created on elements of classical palace architecture, which were adapted to the urban arrangements of many housing estates intended for workers. The buildings were to show the superiority of the new communist architecture over the modernist realizations of the interwar period. In many buildings, architectural solutions implemented were based on palace patterns, also numerous decorative elements, typical of Classicist architecture, were applied, enriched with themes of national architecture style. The urban systems created monumental spatial arrangements (Fig. 1), often connected with industrial plants – steelworks, factories.



**Fig. 1.** Example of socialist realism in Czech Republic – Arch Building in Poruba, house settlement of Ostarava, by Evžen Šteflíček, 1954, photo: authors, p. 1

## Architecture and urban forms of socialist realism in Poland

The period of socialist realism in Poland covered the years 1949–1956, when the country, ruined by World War II, was under Soviet occupation. The enormous destruction of cities allowed the construction of entire urban complexes in the spirit of socialism. During this period, many new districts were created in the cities built for the “working class” in connection with the planned development of industry in the country. Such implementations as Nowa Huta near Cracow. Workers’ districts in most major cities and industrial cities were also created at that time, such as: Marszałkowska Housing District ([*pl.*] *Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa – MDM*) in Warsaw, Kościuszkowska Residential District ([*pl.*] *Kościuszkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa – KDM*) in Wrocław or Downtown Residential District ([*eng.*] *Śródmiejska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa – ŚDM*) in Szczecin.

In architecture, this trend was manifested primarily by monumentalism, which was to instill respect for the power of the new communist authorities. The construction industry of that period was neither economical in terms of materials and costs, nor functional. Architecture of this period was defined as “socialist in content and national in form”. Impressive spaces provided an excellent backdrop for official state ceremonies. Urban systems of housing estates were characterized by axial and symmetrical spatial solutions. The buildings were located around large squares and along wide avenues. The facades located by the main communication routes were given a representative appearance, while at the same time the utility values of the apartments were neglected.

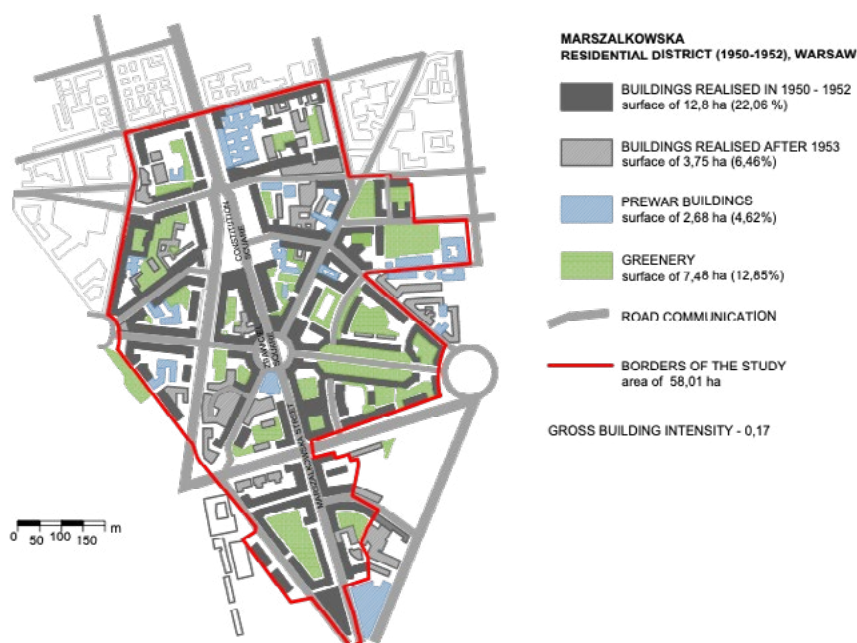
Socialist propaganda in architecture consisted not only of the construction of new buildings, districts or even entire cities, but also removing structures associated with the rejected “bourgeois” ideas. Prime example of such approach is the construction of a workers’ district Marszałkowska Housing District (MDM) in Warsaw, built on ruins located on the main street of Warsaw – Marszałkowska Street. The construction of the workers’ district in this place became a symbol of the reconstruction of the capital of Poland in accordance with the spirit of the new system. Designed by the architecture studio under the direction of Józef Signalin, the MDM district was to implement social justice and equality of citizens in a classless society. Apartments of the same high standard, were designed for tens of thousands of members of the working class [Lorek, 2007]. Similar districts, although built on a smaller scale, were also constructed in other Polish cities. New housing estates built at a dizzying pace were to confirm the power of socialism, and also to introduce the working class to the city centers – an area once reserved for higher social classes [Lorek, 2007].

### Marszałkowska Residential District (MDM) in Warsaw

MDM was the main investment of Warsaw, realized in the years 1949–1955, is still a subject of discussion today. Its construction in the heart of the well-preserved southern city centre required the demolition of many surviving, after WWII, tenement houses. And so, by the end of 1954, almost all of the buildings from the interwar period, between the Union of Lublin Square and Aleje Jerozolimskie street in Warsaw, have disappeared.

The authorities were particularly interested in the construction of MDM from the very beginning. Due to the great importance of the project, it was commissioned to the team that had already worked together on the construction of the East-West route in Warsaw, enthusiastically received by the authorities of the regime and considered to be a model of modern technology solutions. The MDM was to be the residence of approximately 45,000 inhabitants of Warsaw. The investment involved the construction of approximately 6,000 new flats, most of which were designed as 2 – and 3-room apartments of a high standard and larger area than in other housing estates in Warsaw. MDM's flats were initially intended for workers building the estate itself. However, the prestigious buildings located in the centre of the capital were quickly handed over to high-ranking party activists.

## Architecture and urban plan



**Fig. 2.** Plan of Marszałkowska Residential District (MDM), Warsaw, source: authors, p. 3

The axis of the MDM urban plan was Marszałkowska Street (Fig. 2), which was to be almost three times wider than before the war. The centre of the district was to be a rectangular square (there were nearly 50 tenement houses in its place before the war), surrounded by high blocks of flats with arcades on the ground floor, where service premises were located [2]. Marszałkowska Residential District was designed comprehensively, providing residents with comfort and access to various services. The MDM's functional program included: kindergartens, primary schools, health care facilities, indoor swimming pool and sports fields, district community centre, cinemas, theaters, petrol stations, underground car parks, catering infrastructure and other service outlets. Taking care of the high aesthetics of the MDM housing estate, all small service units, kiosks and street booths have been designed according to a uniform pattern and integrated into the body of residential buildings [Stolica, 1950].

The designed residential development of the District was to be equipped with central heating, bathrooms with gas stoves, gas kitchens, high-speed elevators, garbage chutes, garages for prams, laundry and drying rooms in the attics, as well as telephone and radio nodes. The housing estate's blocks of flats are designed mainly as 6–8 storeys, on main streets and squares, and 5–6 on side streets. The ground floor of the buildings along the main streets was made of ferroconcrete in order to obtain large window openings – shop windows. The high ground floor (up to a height of 7 m) was enriched with arcades and colonnades, with terraces,

decorative entrances with elements of sculptures or mosaics. In the design of the facades, especially the front elevations, the three-division principle<sup>1</sup> was applied through the use of cornices, material differentiation, scaling of details or tectonic differentiation of the building [Baraniewski, 2010]. The MDM buildings were finished with expensive, precious materials: the plinth part was made of sandstone or granite, the upper parts in fine plaster of various colours or prefabricated facing bricks, while stone was used to finish window openings, cornices or facade details [Baraniewski, 2010]. The high standard and aesthetics of the housing estate's space and the residential buildings themselves were to compensate for a serious shortcoming of the entire urban planning concept – the lack of high greenery, squares or a nearby park<sup>2</sup>.

## MDM under protection



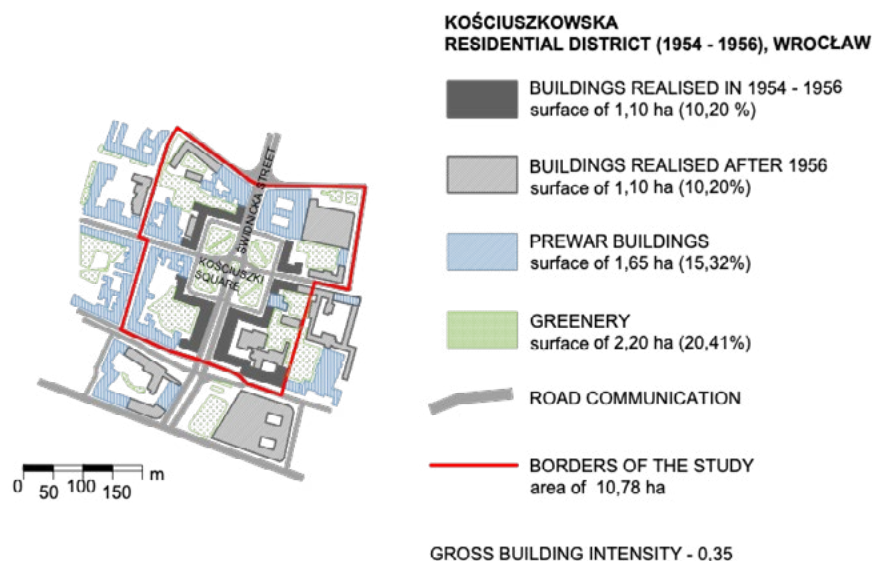
**Fig. 3.** Marszałkowska Residential District, Constitution square, Warsaw, 2015; source: [15], p. 3

Today, the apartments located at the representative Constitution Square are occupied by offices or rented to tourists. Architects did not manage to create a friendly and healthy residential environment (Fig. 3). Nonetheless Marszałkowska Residential District in Warsaw was first entered in the Register of Historical Monuments on April 27, 2015. The entry was intended to protect the values of the socialist realist urban layout and architecture style. However, some building owners and housing associations appealed against the decision of the conservator, alleging that the conservator did not specify the boundaries of the monument and did not specify the criteria for separating the area from the complex of all buildings. After a few months, the Ministry of Culture overturned the decision to enter MDM in the register of monuments. The case went to the provincial conservator of monuments. The decision to re-enter MDM in the monuments register was to allow for more effective fight against illegal advertising, inadequate insulation of buildings or replacement of woodwork with plastic. It was only in March 2017 that the urban layout and architecture of MDM were finally entered in the register of monuments by the Provincial Conservator of Monuments, in a slightly reduced area.

1 The three-division principle referred to the building tradition of Warsaw from the interwar period and the frontage design of tenement houses. The three-division of the façade separated horizontally three parts of the façade: the plinth (ground floor and mezzanine or 1<sup>st</sup> floor), the main body (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> floor) and the top (top floor, cornice, attic or balustrade).

2 MDM has the lowest percentage of green areas among all examined residential districts in the article, which reaches 12,85 %.

## Kościuszkowski Residential District (KDM) in Wrocław



**Fig. 4.** Plan of Kościuszkowski Residential District, Wrocław, source: authors, p.4

The largest and most comprehensive urban and architectural project of the socialist realist period in Wrocław is the Kościuszkowski Residential District ([*pol.*] *Kościuszkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa* – KDM) (Fig. 4) for 4,000 inhabitants, which was implemented between 1954 and 1956 on the site of 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings destroyed during World War II [6]. The project of KDM was selected through a competition organized in 1953 by the Wrocław Branch of SARP (Association of Polish Architects). Its author was the design team of the Wrocław office Miastoprojekt.

### Architecture and urban plan

The design concept corresponded to the style of Warsaw's Marszałkowska Housing District (MDM), but on a much smaller urban scale. KDM was also characterized by attention to the right proportions of buildings – more friendly to residents, as well as a much more modest standard of trimmings. Like the Warsaw MDM, the Kościuszkowski District was a propaganda project. The government's idea was to show, through it, the strength of the growing, on Polish land, new Wrocław.

All arrangements concerning the final shape of the investment had to be approved by the Committee of Urban Planning and Architecture in Warsaw. The new architectural concept preserves the pre-war urban layout of the square, which is located in the centre of the complex and was originally designed by the French engineer H. Blein in 1807 and built on consistently until the 1920s. The square in the middle of KDM, with orthogonally departing streets is surrounded by residential buildings. The junction of the streets in the central part of the square was decorated with a rounded island, which is also the site of an earlier monument. After the war, only three buildings from the former development survived<sup>3</sup>, and were incorporated into the new estate. In the interwar period, Tauntzienplatz<sup>4</sup> served as a kind of prestigious salon for the city [Prętczyński, 2014]. After the war the architects wanted to restore this place to the same prestige. The urban design of the new residential district of Wrocław also included the adjacent streets. The residential buildings included in the complex were designed as five-storey, with a high ground floor in the arcade, which was an analogy to the buildings of the MDM housing estate (Fig. 5).

<sup>3</sup> They were: The Savoy Hotel, the former headquarters of the Dresden Bank branch – now the headquarters of Santander Bank and the Warenhaus Wertheim shopping center – now Renoma shopping center, that closes the urban complex from the north.

<sup>4</sup> Tauntzienplatz – the German name for Kościuszkowski Square, which functioned until Festung Breslau in 1945.



**Fig. 5.** Kościuszki Residential District, aerial view, 2005, photo: [www.fotopolska.eu](http://www.fotopolska.eu), p. 4

The facade design also applied the three-division principle, clearly separating part of the ground floor with wide arcades covered with sandstone slabs, finished with a cornice just below the window openings of the second floor. The main part (2–5 floors) was finished in mineral plaster, with sandstone bands only around the high French windows, while the crowning was a wide sandstone cornice and a steep roof with oval dormers. The corners of the buildings are accentuated by wide stripes of sandstone slabs running from the plinth to the main cornice and by the corner attic walls in the form of balusters made of stone. The design of the apartment was spacious, accessible from staircases on the side of green courtyards [Pręczyński, 2014].

## KDM under protection

Today, KDM is considered to be one of the best post-war projects in Wrocław. Its architectural qualities and urban layout were highly valued from the beginning. Already in 1994, KDM was entered in the Wrocław register of monuments<sup>5</sup>. It protects the urban layout and architecture of individual buildings included in the KDM complex.

## Nowa Huta Housing Estate in Cracow

Works on the project of the city of Nowa Huta (Fig. 6) began immediately after the WWII in 1948. It was Poland's first post-war city built entirely from scratch. Today it is a district of Cracow. Nowa Huta terrain was an industrial center, which was a gigantic employee base for the emerging metallurgical plant. The residential part was designed by Tadeusz Ptaszycski, an architect born in St. Petersburg, though already educated in Poland. Part of the (old) Nowa Huta erected during the socialist realism period fulfilled many of the rules in force at that time regarding the shaping of the urban fabric [Sumorok, 2014].

<sup>5</sup> Register of monuments of the city of Wrocław (state for the 17.01.2011), register number: A/1491/543/Wm. Available online: [https://tumw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/rejestr\\_zabytkow\\_pdf-17-01-2011.pdf](https://tumw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/rejestr_zabytkow_pdf-17-01-2011.pdf) (10.11.2019)



**Fig. 6.** Plan of Nowa Huta Housing Estate, Cracow, source: authors, p. 5

## Architecture and urban plan

Nowa Huta and its successive housing estates were established over a period of several dozen years, representing urban architectural concepts typical of the socialist realism period up to late modernism. Over the years, the character of the housing, its intensity and the quality of the new buildings have changed. Apart from the obvious care for recreational areas and greenery during planning, Nowa Huta's concept was first of all in keeping with Howard's idea thanks to its clear urban network with a clearly separated green centre, extensive residential complexes and wide communication arteries in the form of avenues planted with trees. The designed principles of green housing estate combined elements of the historical style of the city (rows of trees, with the conceptions of interwar functionalism)[Sumorok, 2014, Komorowski, 2017]. The first part of the housing estates (1949–1950) was located closest to the plant – the Lenin Steelworks, which was built according to the first, classicist plan. They had an intimate scale and a traditional form, modelled on the pre-war residential districts. The next stage of construction of the housing estate (1950–1956) was already implemented in accordance with the styles of socialist realism intensively promoted at that time [Komorowski, 2017]. This caused a departure from the concept of a garden city. In addition, due to the expanded metallurgical plant and the increased number of target residents of the Nowa Huta estate, it was necessary to increase the number of flats. The original building design was modified in the spirit of the idea of socialist realism. Tadeusz Ptaszycki's team created a new design of the Central Square and adjacent buildings. This huge square (today named after Ronald Reagan) was part of the idea of propaganda architecture. In the next, third stage of expansion of the Nowa Huta housing estate, the symmetrical assumptions of housing complexes began to diverge. During this period, the Town Hall Square was created, which stood in opposition to the axial and symmetrical development of Róż (*eng. Rose*) Avenue (Fig. 7). The creation of closed urban interiors, similar to the quarterly residential development, was ceased, and more free, open inter-block spaces were started to be created.



**Fig. 7.** Nowa Huta Housing Estate, Rose Avenue, 2018; photo: Authors, p. 5

The city's political history is lined with an ironic thread, because "the first socialist city" in the 1980s became one of the "fortresses" of Solidarity<sup>6</sup>. Local protests and street demonstrations were an important element in the fight against the political regime in Poland.

### Nowa Huta under protection

In the following years, after 1959, Nowa Huta was expanded with new housing estates. Some of them irreversibly affected the disharmony of the Central Square panorama and further caused the depreciation of the urban composition of the center of Nowa Huta [Komorowski, 2017]. The oldest part of Nowa Huta was entered in the register of monuments only in 2004. The entry only referred to the protection of the urban layout of the oldest building complex. It did not concern architecture, which should be subject to special conservation protection, and effectively protect buildings against modernization and destructive renovations, the architectural details of Nowa Huta buildings and the original form of development. The urban layout of Nowa Huta is a closed, though infinite, work. It is a testimony of a bygone style era, governed by different rules than today. Regardless of the aesthetic assessment, it should be respected as a historical value. For these reasons, it is protected by a legal provision that generally does not allow major changes. In April 2015, the Provincial Conservator of Monuments decided to enter in the register of monuments, buildings located around the central square. Ronald Reagan.

In 2017, the analysis of the introduction of the Cultural Park in Nowa Huta began. This action would facilitate and deepen conservation protection of the area of old Nowa Huta. In 2017, extensive social consultations were held with the residents and owners of Nowa Huta on the protection plan of the Nowa Huta Cultural Park [Myczkowski, 2017]. On November 20, 2019, the Krakow City Council adopted a resolution on the creation of a cultural park under the name Nowa Huta Cultural Park. The resolution was adopted to protect the cultural landscape, monuments and the historical urban layout of Nowa Huta, for the sake of a proper image of the City, in order to preserve and shape the cultural landscape and the historical nature of public space in this area.

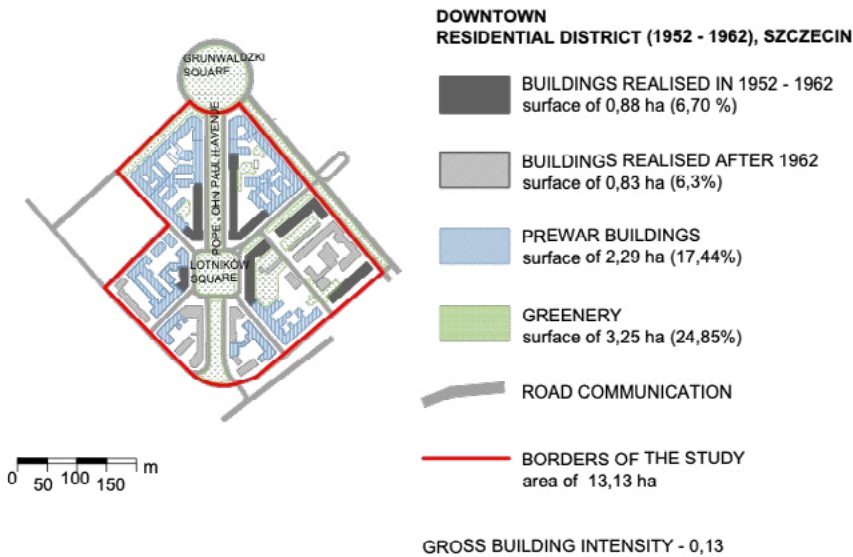
### Downtown Residential District (ŚDM) in Szczecin

The Downtown Housing District in Szczecin ([*pol.*] *Śródmiejska Dzielnica Mieszaniowa – ŚDM*) project covered the area of three squares: Grunwaldzki, Lotników, and Żołnierza Polskiego, where it was planned to rebuild the destroyed buildings that qualified for this, and to erect new buildings in the place of those demolished (Fig. 8).

<sup>6</sup> A nationwide trade union founded in 1980 to defend employee rights. Until 1989 also one of the main centers of opposition against the government of People's Poland and communism, headed by Lech Wałęsa.



The project of several dozen buildings covered a significant area of the downtown area and was completed in the years 1952–1962. The new district aimed at cleaning up the destroyed downtown area – merging scattered fragments of buildings that survived the war bombardment and providing accommodation for about 60,000 people resettled to Szczecin from former eastern Poland.



**Fig. 8.** Plan of Downtown Residential District, Szczecin, source: authors, p. 6

## Architecture and urban plan



**Fig. 9.** Residential buildings of SDM, nearby Grunwaldzki square, Szczecin, 2019; photo: Authors, p. 7

The Downtown Housing District was to be the first pillar of the city's reconstruction after World War II. New buildings, created in the spirit of social-modernist architecture, made it possible to create better living conditions

than pre-war solutions, which were assessed negatively by the creators of the new housing estate [Łopuch, 2011]. The downtown buildings of pre-war Szczecin were mainly tenement houses from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with poor hygiene and sanitary standards. The new housing estate, like the MDM, was to take care of all the needs of the residents. A whole range of services, schools, kindergartens, nurseries, clinics, shops and green recreation areas were provided within the estate. In this respect, the housing estate was part of the 'Athens Charter' adopted in 1933, which shaped a new urban thought precisely in terms of a modern housing estate ensuring the availability of basic services, set hygienic and sanitary standards for the flats themselves and treated the healthy housing environment with access to greenery and recreation facilities.

The urban layout of ŚDM included the use of existing and well-preserved road infrastructure and a network of sanitary facilities. The newly designed buildings (Fig. 9) reflected the original line of development, incorporating the preserved buildings into the new urban fabric. The ŚDM buildings were supposed to close the existing nineteenth-century quarters, making them more functional – through larger courtyards with greenery.

## ŚDM under protection

The development of the Downtown District is protected by the provisions of the Local Development Plan 'Centrum – Plac Odrodzenie' in Szczecin in 2008. The provisions strictly define potential possibilities of introducing changes to existing buildings<sup>7</sup>. In addition, the buildings of the Downtown Housing Development complex were included in the goods of modern culture in Spatial Development Plan of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in 2010 [Kozłowska, Rek-Lipczyńska, 2017].

## Conclusions

The new districts of post-war Poland were linked by the fact that they were created in a centralized supervision system, traditional approach to both urban planning and architecture, as well as by the representativeness and monumentalism of the external appearance of the buildings. This aspect connects all four residential districts studied. Despite the fact that each of them has a different scale – starting from the largest Nowa Huta in Cracow, which is a town-district, and ending on the Wrocław Kościuszko Residential District with an area of approx. 10 ha, they have a similar urban composition, based on the axial or radial layout with centrally located squares (Fig. 10).

Additionally, all of the researched housing complexes have a very low gross building intensity coefficient<sup>8</sup>, which for most districts is less than 0.2. This factor for buildings up to 7 floors, can be up to 0.55 [Chmielewski, 2010]. This allows the arrangement of wide and comfortable communication routes with high plantings and provides large inter-block spaces that light up the interiors of the apartments well.

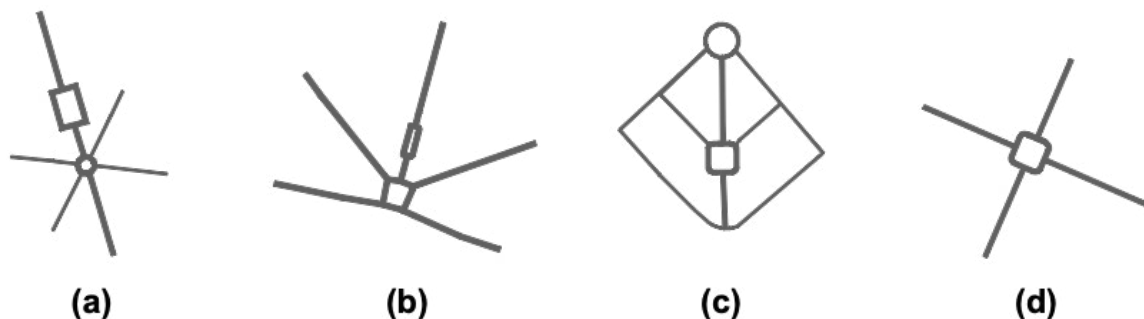
An important aspect of maintaining this building in an unchanged and well-preserved conditions is its adequate protection. However the principles of protection are implemented at various levels. Some of them protect the urban layout, not individual buildings (this applies to the Nowa Huta housing estate in Krakow). Others are protected only by the provisions of the local development plan, which specifies the nature of new buildings arising in the surrounding area, and changes to existing buildings (Śródmiejska Residential District in Szczecin). However, this protection is not as strict as that concerning objects covered by conservator's protection (Kosciuszkowska District of Housing or Marszałkowska District of Housing).

Most of the analyzed housing complexes have only been covered protection over the last few years. Unfortunately, for most of them it is too late, and earlier changes or modernizations of existing buildings irreversibly changed the character of historical buildings. Such late protection of these urban complexes results from the

7 Resolution NR XXIII/596/08 Szczecin City Council, June 16, 2008, Regarding the Local Spatial Development Plan "Centrum – Plac Odrodzenie" in Szczecin

8 This is the quotient of the built-up area and the total area of the district (including transport routes).

fact that the socialist realism architectural style has been poorly associated for years. Moreover, immediately after the end of the socialist realism period, this trend was criticized by the architects<sup>9</sup>.



**Fig. 10.** (a) diagram of the urban layout of the MDM district in Warsaw. It is an axial arrangement with the main axis of Marszałkowska street and main squares – Constitution Square and Zbawiciel Square; (b) diagram of the urban layout of Nowa Huta residential district. The plan is implemented in a radial arrangement, with centrally located Ronald Reagan Central Square and outgoing five communication routes, including the main, centrally located, Roses Avenue; (c) diagram of ŚDM district in Szczecin implemented on an axial plan with the main axis of John Paul II Avenue and two squares – Grunwaldzki Square and Lotników Square; (d) diagram of the urban layout of KDM district in Wrocław. Implemented as a central arrangement with Kościuszki Square located in the center and two communication routes crossing in the center of the foundation; p. 7

Due to the so-called top-down management of architecture, uncritical imitation of examples of Soviet architecture and erroneous theoretical assumptions in this period, the utility of architecture was devalued and crushed by pompous forms incompatible with the humanistic assumptions of socialism [Sumorok, 2014]. Design reality reveals a number of paradoxes. The most obvious ones relate to the collision of imposed, political and real space, existing in some way individualized. However, this architecture is a testimony of a certain period that deserves to be remembered.

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<sup>9</sup> Socialist realism in architecture was negatively evaluated at the National Architects' Conference held in Warsaw on 15–17 March 1956 where it was claimed that direction of urban planning and architecture in the years 1949–1955 was fundamentally wrong [8]. Socialist realism in Poland ended after the Polish National Council of Architects in 1956.

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