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Here, But Not Now: A Local Tour of a Global Future in *The Afterlife of Buildings*

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous analysons l'exposition The Afterlife of Buildings. *Les artistes Nicolas Grospierre et Kobas Laksa ont dressé le portrait de Varsovie dans un proche avenir, en manipulant les photographies de six bâtiments récemment construits et en jouant sur l'expression matérielle de l'identité postsocialiste de cette ville. L'exposition fut présentée dans un « Hotel Polonia » fictif, invitant figurativement le public à contempler l'avenir de Varsovie tout en réfléchissant à son histoire, sa mémoire et la qualité précaire et transitoire de son présent. Et pourtant, en créant cette vision de l'avenir de Varsovie, les artistes ont branché la ville sur le récit mondial du développement durable et de l'échec des rêves idéologiques.*

Abstract

In this essay we explore the exhibition The Afterlife of Buildings. *Artists Nicolas Grospierre and Kobas Laksa craft a portrait of Warsaw's near future through a manipulation of photographs of six buildings recently constructed in the city, playing upon its post-socialist material expressions of identity. The exhibition was presented in a fictitious "Hotel Polonia"—figuratively inviting viewers to gaze into Warsaw's future while reflecting upon its history, memory and the precarious and transitioning quality of its present. And yet, in creating a vision of Warsaw's future the artists have plugged the city into a global narrative on sustainability and the failure of ideological dreams.*

> If you remember an event which happened in Warsaw, it means that it could have equally as well have taken place anywhere else or never have taken place at all. Varga (2010: 149)[1]

The future is not what it used to be—where once visual representations of the future offered a fantastic, if conventional, representation of collective wishes and fears, images of tomorrow are becoming increasingly ambivalent, equivocal and nuanced. In this study, we focus on the futuristic visual art of Polish photographer Nicolas Grospierre and collage artist Kobas Laksa. Their photographic montage *The Afterlife of Buildings* offers a re-imagining of new architectural structures in Warsaw in a futurescape that plays neither to a blind optimism of the near future, nor to dystopic renderings of dread. Awarded the Golden Lion for Best National Participation at the 2008 Venice Biennale in Architecture, this quirky work set out to spark debate on the permanence and impermanence, or fluidity, of architecture and on the way changes in social and environmental conditions might affect our buildings (Zacheta 2008). The constructed identities of the past surface in these futuristic portraits of Warsaw and produce a hybridized assembly of its history and amnesia, its dreams and nightmares, in an invitation to gaze into this vision of the city's—and the world's—future.

Although the intention of this project is to address global phenomena like our unsustainable throw-away lifestyle, in focusing on six new buildings in Warsaw the exhibition touches on a

variety of localized sentiments. The works speak to nostalgia for former ideological fantasies, the conflicts associated with post-socialist identity and a celebratory indulgence of consumerism that comes with a new free market economy. As post-socialist art, Grospierre's and Laksa's images construct Warsaw's future as an unsettling mix of ruptures and erasures in collective wishes and memory. The images also play upon anxieties brought about by a post-capitalistic future that is devoid of a collective utopian project toward progress. The decay of grand myths—a symptom of a post-industrial modernity in both East and West—is presented as an enticement to the viewer, as a tourist brochure would offer a similarly airbrushed and fantastical vacation paradise.

In *The Afterlife of Buildings*, the viewer is confronted with a cacophony of past, present and future Polish identities excavated from previous eras when local and national material culture was destroyed, demolished, reconstructed, exhumed, borrowed, copied and transplanted from other places (France, Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, among them). The atmosphere belies a simmering tension within Varsovian identity where uncertainty about the present is expressed through an idiosyncratic mixture of gloomy anxiety and giddy anticipation about the future.

In the explanation of their work, the artists emphasize the global nature of their concern over the posterity of buildings; however, Warsaw has a long history of architectural remodelling, reconstruction and repurposing which colours this project with local references and context. Polish history is often framed as a succession of revolutions and regime changes, each time warranting an architectural makeover which was to transform the city so as to reflect the ideological tenets and the glorified, but constructed, legacy of each new political doctrine. Treating architecture in Warsaw as a palette onto which (a selective) history and ideology is written is a tradition that peaked in the socialist era when, for example, history was quite literally drawn on the facade of structures to enable the buildings, districts and other local sites to tell a story. Artists were hired to paint historical graffiti on exterior walls, giving the built environment a didactic purpose, often illustrating tales of heroic Polish figures and myths (Crowley 2003). Grospierre's and Laksa's works continue this tradition of "etching" a city's story and selective cultural memory onto facades, reminding us that buildings are void of inherent meaning and not to be trusted as an accurate narrative of civic history. *The Afterlife of Buildings* presents an interesting reversal: the future rather than the past is painted onto photographic images of the city, thus dislodging a firm sense of historical flow and revealing the dubiousness of highly crafted material memory in the context of the cityscape. Of course the future can only be speculated and the artists propose that this is only one of many possible scenarios for these buildings; but, presenting an uncertain future underscores the uneasiness about the present. No longer is the future a coherent vision of progress or a post-apocalyptic wasteland—today's future is a hybrid of today's fears, anxieties, lingering memories and shifting values.

While Grospierre and Laksa are presenting a global scenario, they inevitably engage Polish viewers in a complex negotiation of a national hybrid identity, while creating representations of Warsaw for the outsider. The combination of global fear placed within the projected (and stereotypical) banality of Warsaw as the near-but-otherworldly city was popular with the exhibit visitors in Venice. This is not, after all, the first time artists have rendered the future visually and presented us with grim scenarios of chaos, overcrowding and civil deterioration. Yet the work's success indicates a lingering, and particularly Western, fascination with the East as a site of exoticism, otherness and idiosyncrasies. In the Biennale exhibition, the Polish pavilion, or "Hotel Polonia" (Fig. 1)—the exterior crafted in the "fascist-flavoured art deco style," the interior repurposed into a sleek honeymoon suite installation—offered patrons a bed and an invitation to spend the night (Zacheta 2008).

Playing off the hotel setting, the buildings featured in the photographs, even their presence, are fleeting since their purpose will be repeatedly redefined by future occupants. The hotel setting of the exhibit gave visitors a sense of touristic sampling of Warsaw through its recent architectural projects. Playing upon the sense of temporary presence afforded by a hotel's atmosphere, and with tongue firmly in cheek, the images offered a tour of the future, if the present failed to impress.

Between Dwelling and Forgetting

Poland, along with many other Eastern European countries, is in a profound state of temporal disorientation. It is a society burdened by its past and haunted by the ghosts of socialism (Marciniak 2009: 186). On one hand, we currently witness a

“heightened interest in the past” and see that the time has come for Eastern European societies to finally reflect upon their histories and perhaps even learn to embrace them (Badinovac 2009). According to Badinovac, Eastern European artists are especially capable of offering alternatives to homogenizing forms of globalization if they incorporate their experiences into their work rather than shying from them for fear of distancing a Western audience. Charity Scribner (2003: 4) further explains that global contemporary cultural and political conditions can only be understood “with sustained attention” to the transitions experienced in Eastern Europe in the past twenty years. On the other hand, there are those who argue that the European East is not yet ready to engage in this kind of global conversation, that it is still in a period of denial or “wilful amnesia” (Crowley 2003: 19), which prefers to hold on to select memories and erase those that are uncomfortable in favour of a new start—a blank slate to be inscribed upon by the West. In this view, an ongoing inability to embrace its own history as a complicated set of experiences and knowledge rather than a shameful or glorified story, prevents Poland from including its past within a shared global history.

To hold onto the past reflects a need to assert national identity and experience in the face of what appear to be homogenizing forces, like consumerism. To erase it reflects a desire to be equal in the eyes of the Westerner, it is difficult to simply let go of the differences which at one time were deemed sufficiently important to build walls and raise iron curtains. In Warsaw, this tension between erasure and dwelling is ongoing, unresolved and manifested in negotiations of extremes: “past and present, death and survival, demolition and reconstruction, suppression and innovation, communism and capitalism, East and West” (Zaborowska 2004: 98). Importantly, these complicated attitudes about past, present and future are reflected in the treatment of the built environment and its architecture, old and new.

Impermanent Landscapes

> The landscape is the greatest illusion of all, because there is nothing constant about it. (Tokarczuk 2002: 138)

According to David Crowley’s (2003) expose on Warsaw, the city had at one time briefly risen from a modest medieval commercial centre to the seat of power in the late Renaissance. However, it lost its status as the royal seat of the Republic in the

Fig. 1
Hotel Polonia, the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2008.

18th century, also losing parliament after a series of state partitionings. The city then lost a significant portion of its population, returning to a provincial town of no particular stature. In the early 19th century, there was a brief period of revival when the Congress Kingdom was established, linking Warsaw politically and economically to Russia in 1815. This led to a boom in neo-classical construction of large projects like the National Theatre. In this cycle of razing and rebuilding, much of the medieval cityscape was demolished and self-conscious modernization ensued—a trend which has determined the cycle of demolition and development in Warsaw to this day. After a series of uprisings, Russian authorities inflicted greater control over Warsaw and its architecture. In this era, historical parts of Warsaw fell into neglect while stately edifices underwent a Russian makeover. For example, the neo-classical Staszic Palace was resurfaced in the Byzantine-Russian style replete with a new onion shaped dome. After the First World War, a similar remodelling took place. The Tsarist monuments were dismantled and new public buildings representing Poland’s independence were erected in the Modernist (and minimalist) style.

The Second World War brought on another wave of destruction, with an estimated eighty to eighty-five per cent of the city destroyed (Zaborowska 2004; Crowley 2003). City planners and politicians directed the reconstruction of large sections of the

colourful and historic Old Town. Looking like the originals which had been built mostly in the 17th and 18th centuries, there is nevertheless something sombre about the duplicates, at once a constant reminder of destruction and a marker of a material separation from its past (Crowley 2003). Other parts of the city carry a reputation for being gray and drab, littered with architectural remnants of socialist structures. This reconstruction following the war has deepened Warsaw's history as a tragic city where progress is founded upon destruction, a city built from rubble and ashes, atop cemeteries and ruins, where "death…has been domesticated" and the boundaries between life and death are fluid (Crowley 2003; Zielińska qtd.in Zaborowska 2004: 99). Ewa Toniak's quip "disappearance—that's Warsaw" in Poland's e-magazine *Obieg*, poignantly captures this perpetual destruction and regeneration.[2] It is a city that has never been stable and exists almost in spite of the instability of its built forms, almost unwillingly bound to the old utopian dream of being "freed from the metaphysics of place" (Crowley 2003: 12).[3] To further push the point, not only have the structures come and gone with every major regime change, but the ground itself, even foundations, are by nature fluid, unstable and impermanent. A city built on sand, Warsaw is physically and metaphorically rooted in mutability and endangerment wherein grounded longevity is an impossibility. Alongside this fluidity and constant redevelopment emerges a sensation of absence, made visible by empty plots and barren spaces or voids once occupied by structures that no longer exist (Crowley 2003). These fissures open up the past and provide a feeling of palpable absence reminding Varsovians and visitors alike that the city is fragmented, leaving them with a shared nostalgia not only for the pre-war city and its medieval and neo-classical architecture, but even for its post-war socialist facade as new Western architectural styles are imported and inserted into the urban fabric.

Consuming the East

For Westerners, Eastern Europe is perhaps the equivalent of a wild frontier, awaiting the changes brought by Western explorers. But while the West has indeed shown interest in Poland and in other Eastern European countries as tourist destinations, this interest may be driven by a perceived opportunity to be immersed in the "quirky" differences offered by the East. Despite an apparent commonality as Europeans, Poles continue to be Europe's Other. Visitors are drawn to this "post-catastrophic city of an unfulfilled utopia" (Toniak 2006) where they can witness and step into an alternate universe and have a taste of "socialist exotica" (Marciniak 2009: 186). While Poles are still dealing with their history by negotiating between forgetting and remembering, the West seems most interested, or finds most value, in continuing to enjoy its fetishization of the East through a selective perception of socialism as a purely cultural phenomenon. The glorification of socialism has led to cheeky tourism showcasing communist kitsch[4] not only as a form of Otherness but as a romantic idealization of a kind of non-capitalistic utopia: a glorification of scarcity, lack of choice, muted individualism and miserable collective standardizations.

The label of the Other, the backward and peripheral to Europe, is historically ingrained. In his study on the invention of Eastern Europe by Western Europe during the Enlightenment, Larry Wolff explains that, in the 19th century, crossing eastward through Polish lands was a momentary step backward. Edmund Burke famously characterized it as the "country on the moon" while others described it as the "orang-utan of Europe" (Wolff 1994: 342). To visit Poland connoted travel back in time, so much so that the journey from Paris to Warsaw was once characterized as one of "interplanetary displacement" (251). Despite the accusation of arcane backwardness and centuries of rejection, Poles hold on to a belief that in fact they belong to the West and to Western culture. Although Poland was officially accepted in the West as a member of the European Union in 2004, this spatial and economic inclusion has not necessarily produced a total unification. In other words, the parameters of time and history as markers of difference have yet to be determined definitively. Differences produced by the administration of space and time in Eastern and Western Europe have been challenged and disrupted by the unification of Europe and the expansion of de-territorialized global networks. So, while on one hand we are perhaps ready to speak of a "shared time"—a contemporaneity which includes East and West, a post-Soviet condition marked by a shared historical moment (Buck-Morss 2006; Condee 2008)—on the other there is a lingering uncertainty about the merging of East and West. Marciniak (2009), for instance, wonders if there really can be a shared history and memories between East and West. Can the West know what the East has endured, adopt its memories and learn its history as its own? And, she ponders, is it conceivable to

imagine a Europe which speaks of East and West as one? And while there is much hope and optimism attached to the idea of a Poland that is finally recognized as Western and European, Rastko Mocnik (2006: 344) warns that in this process the East is letting go of its identity, its localized particularity and grounded historicity, for the sake of entry into "the serene firmament of universality" which the West represents.

The Afterlife of Buildings

Grospierre's and Laksa's works are a good example of the distortion of historicization and the experience of time in a city. Their images can be considered a response to the city's effacement that is sponsored by the West (Crowley 2003), seemingly calling for a recognition of inclusion based on like-mindedness, as if Varsovians in the future will say, "Look! We share with you an indulgent, wasteful consumer lifestyle. Our skyline is also a shrine to commercial power and we share your affinity for the perpetually new." The potential for Warsaw's new commercialized urban transformation is evident throughout *The Afterlife of Buildings*. When the current mass-utopian capitalist developments and dreams fail, the entire urban project is at risk of unravelling and crumbling. According to David Harvey, the capitalistic (and post-socialist) city presents the movement of capital through buildings. In Warsaw, waves of investment into architectural projects have led to what Harvey calls the "overaccumulation of capital" (Harvey 2007: 117) in that a free market economy inevitably operates as a mechanism to transform raw materials into an ever-growing pile of post-consumer waste. Grospierre and Laksa play upon Harvey's notion of accumulation and the results of a materially productive economy in the gated housing estate, Marina Mokotow (Fig. 2).

In this work, the gated community blocks differ little from the socialist era housing *bloki* where concrete high rises guaranteed homogenized and equalized housing. The rising popularity of these complexes in Warsaw suggests a number of uncomfortable issues: urban territorialism, a perception of rampant inner-city crime and a new middle-class xenophobia, as some of the urban motifs imported from the West to the new liberal markets of the East. With freedom has come inequality and paranoia. In the pristine and spacious safety of the gated community, with its post-socialist—and possible post-consumerist—future, a newly adopted concept in urban planning is buried under its own pile of post-consumer waste. As Susan Buck-Morss notes in her writings on Moscow, "The dream of culture for the masses has created a panoply of phantasmagoric effects that aestheticize the violence of modernity and anaesthetize its victims" (2002: xi). The vision presented by the artists is perhaps worse than an anesthetization: the future is drawn as daunting or actively disengaged rather than numbed or hypnotized to the fallout of consumption and waste production. The images refuse to reveal whether Western habits of consumption and waste production have allowed Warsaw to draw iteratively from its previous identities, or if Warsaw cannot escape these past identities to the extent that they presently co-exist in an idiosyncratic jumble of paradoxes and hybrids.

Fig. 2
Top: Grospierre's photographs of the housing complex, Marina Mokotow, (phase one) completed in 2005. The image on the bottom is Laksa's futuristic rendition of the gated housing estate.

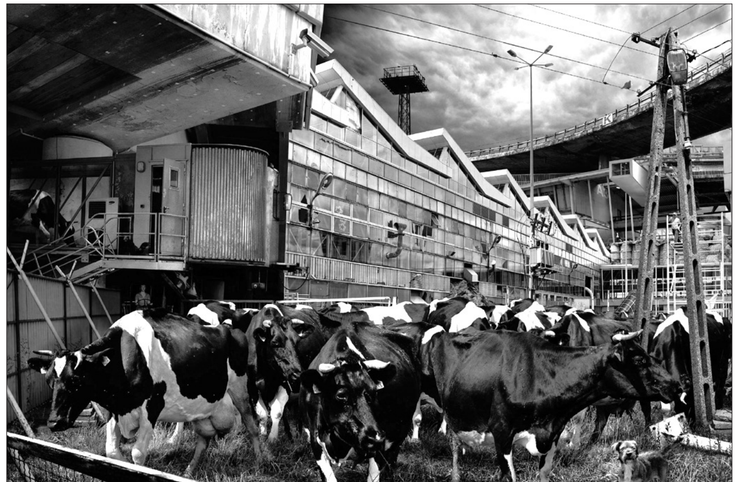


Fig. 3
Left: Warsaw's Fryderyk Chopin International Airport completed in 2008, photos by Grospierre. At right are Laksa's futuristic images of the airport, Terminal 2.

These tensions have symbolic resonance in the images of the Fryderyk Chopin International Airport (Fig. 3) in Warsaw. The airport, as a site which implies openness to the world, is loaded with connotations: when planned and constructed, an airport or commercial complex emulates a future-forward outlook for the city, a gateway intended to impress visitors as they arrive. A large, modern airport that is relatively new, clean and systematically efficient, is a city's badge of cosmopolitanism. Its design calls attention to the city as an international hub and lends a sense of self-importance. But here, in their future renderings, the artists have transformed the airport into a cattle pen and goose coop—it is a chaotic, dingy, agricultural use of the space harkening back to a peasant past. Aircraft are replaced with cows, runways become pastures, and the buildings apparently have no expressed use as interior space. In the future, the space is dirty and decayed but it is rendered somehow organic and earthy. It echoes the ennui of routine country life and it is unclear whether the future is grim, optimistic, utilitarian and practical, or savage and rustic. The international cosmopolitan connoisseur is invited to consume Warsaw and its historically muddled materialities as a city that is at once futuristic and tethered to its past. This image offers the Westerner the quaint backwardness of the East, as well as a perversely satisfying distortion of the Western capitalistic model of the 21st-century city. By imagining a future where the airport space regresses rather than projecting a futuristic transportation hub, the artists are suggesting a change in global dynamics and networks, but also a return to local isolation and sustainability.

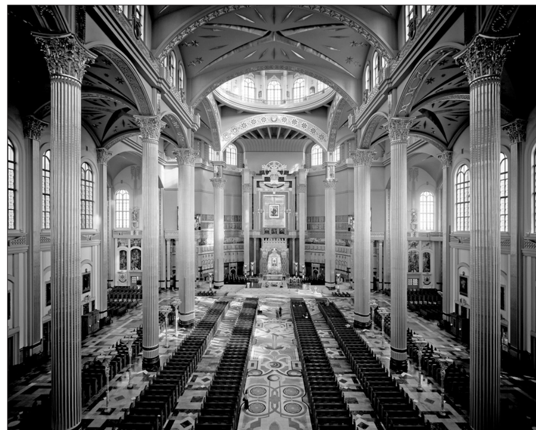
It is, however, in the images of interior spaces that we see the most tension between Polish identity and the promises of the West. Unlike the images of outside spaces, the interiors reveal a human presence. In some of these images the future is imagined as a site of recreation, joy or an affront to established institutions. Quiet, cerebral or spiritual spaces

Fig. 4
Top: Warsaw University Library, completed in 1999. Images photographed by Grospierre. Bottom: Laksa's futuristic library.

give way to immature, indulgent and commercial pleasures. For example, The Warsaw University Library (Fig. 4) is repurposed into a shopping mall.

Built on top of a well known underground shopping mall, car park and amusement park replete with arcades and a bowling alley, the library is a testament to these times in which even institutions of higher learning need to find their funds wherever they can (Crowley 2003). This is in stark contrast to the socialist dream of a future in which workers spent their free time bettering themselves through cultural and intellectual means, and where the capital "was to be a place of libraries, cultural centers, schools, theatres, 'factories of culture'" (Crowley 2003: 33). In the post-socialist future, the site of learning and contemplation is repurposed into a fun shopping mall, the underground becomes visible and consumes the library. After all, Grospierre and Laksa ask, who will need libraries when books become obsolete (Zacheta 2008)?

Meanwhile, the ludicrously grand and monumental cathedral, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrow (Fig. 5), is refashioned into a temple of earthy pleasures in the form of a water park. The image of the church in particular offers a direct confrontation between secular, hedonistic values and the current brand of conservative hyper-Catholicism that has gripped Poland (and its public institutions) since the end of socialism (Marciniak 2009). Despite this trend, the artists ask why such an extravagant church, seemingly from another era, should be built when church attendance in on the decline (Zacheta 2008). In trying to generate grandeur, the invention of historical importance through architecture is only fitting in a city with such a precarious notion of permanence. National



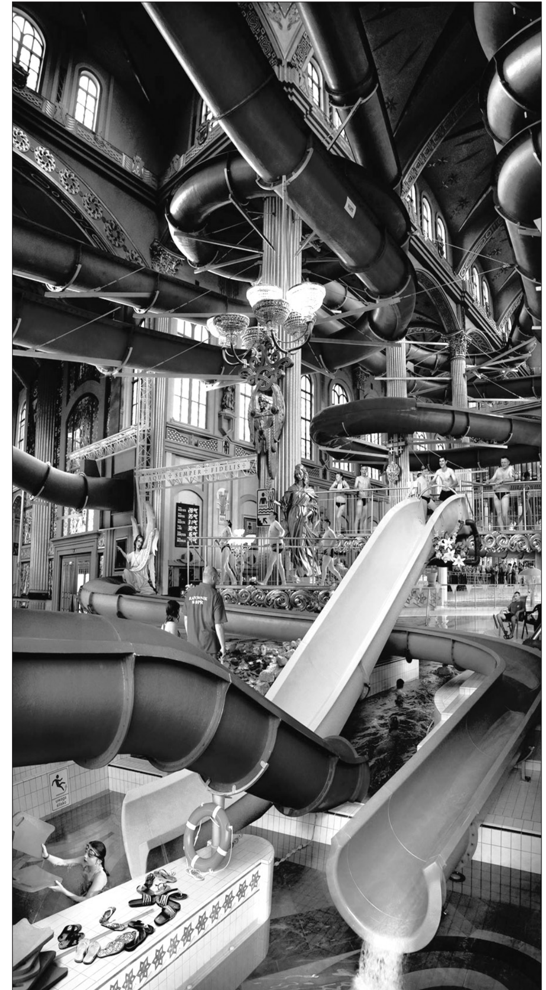


Fig. 5
Left: Sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrows completed in 2004, images photographed by Grospierre. Right: The future Marian church as rendered by Laksa.

identity in Poland is tied intimately to the Catholic tradition. A Polish future where churches are emptied of their holy significance is perhaps not so surprising; we can count on an enduring tradition of cynical indifference that will continuously change the status and meaning of the sacred (ibid.).

The perception and caricature of the West as a place that is carefree, where money buys happiness, where people are shielded from the greater problems of the world is reflected here in the regression of adults into children. Instead of libraries and churches, and of knowledge and spiritual goals, the future gives us fun at the expense of decorum and dignity. In these repurposings, places and sites are corrupted as values shift and become, arguably, debased and "Westernized."

This imagined future not only begs practical questions such as whether there are jobs in a world that no longer has places of learning, offices or libraries, but more importantly, whether there is a sense of collectivist purpose in this imagined society, that has, it seems, once and for all let go of socialist mythology. There is something macabre about this picture of the future of capitalism in Warsaw. While inside there lurks something akin to a dark carnival—an anarchic folly—the outside is desolate, overgrown or showing signs of overcrowding. The commercial office space projects like the Metropolitan, RONDO 1 and the airport terminal are imported designs from non-Polish architectural firms, and it is arguable that these structures are banal, typical examples of Western contemporary urban design and are, more importantly, materially emblematic of Western values.

The RONDO 1 commercial complex (Fig. 6) built by a London-based architectural firm showcases an ordinary, mirrored glass skyscraper typical of modern (and Western) cities. Its curved shape and tiered facade are the typical hallmarks of modern city architecture. In the future image, however, the mirrored facade is decorated with concrete embellishments reminiscent of neo-classical design, and

the vast intersection at its entrance has become a repository for displaced tombstones. Like the other images of exterior space, this tower is dwarfed by larger structures looming overhead that partially ingest RONDO 1, robbing it of status on the skyline. There is a sense of failure of the grand myths of progress and of modern commercial success, but the images also unsettle dark foundations of these shiny, gleaming new glass constructions. In the future, Warsaw displaces the dead and sacred, mourning the failure of capitalist enterprise not by destroying its buildings but through their repurposing. The stacked tombstones are at once a symbol of overcrowding, even in graveyards, and a material metaphor for the city's displaced past identities, silently cluttering the terrain.

Some of the artists' images indicate an ambivalence towards the future decay and failure of the commercial bounty of these contemporary structures. For example, the Metropolitan office building is reimagined as a structure in shambles, dwarfed by other rusty and decayed structures above and below, leaving the original Metropolitan office complex as a non-descript yet foreboding layer in the urban strata of ruins (Fig. 7). A closer, cynical examination might see a building designed for a more sinister form of control. In comments posted to the *We-Make-Money-Not-Art-Blog* on November 6, 2008, a critic wrote,

> What's the use of the Metropolitan office building? … Could it be bought one day by the police and turned into a prison? The building encircles the courtyard in an almost perfect panopticon and the polished surface of the walls multiply reflections, enabling a surveillance from all points of view.[5]

It is interesting to note that the artists changed the facade from glass to metal bars and bricks, and that it is specifically the glass exterior walls which incite anxiety in this response. Glass is the architectural material of our era, signifying transparency, light and reflectivity; but for the viewer, this transparency is equated with punitive surveillance and sparks paranoia and discomfort.

Architectural materials have historically been the most enduring and omnipresent symbols of value in any culture. In the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin explained how iron and glass arcades had been the key architectural legacy of 19th-century Paris and that these were the very fabric of urban capitalism (Benjamin and Tiedmann 1999). Today, in new construction projects like the Metropolitan, glass is employed as a material signifier of post-modernity, commercial prowess and 21st-century growth. Buildings with glass facades are still an exotic minority in Warsaw and are very much associated, for that reason, with the "new" Poland. In *The Afterlife of Buildings*, however, metal replaces glass in the fabric of the cityscape as a symbol of capitalism's failures, the return of oppressive state control, and perhaps represents a throwback to socialist paranoia and pervasive surveillance.

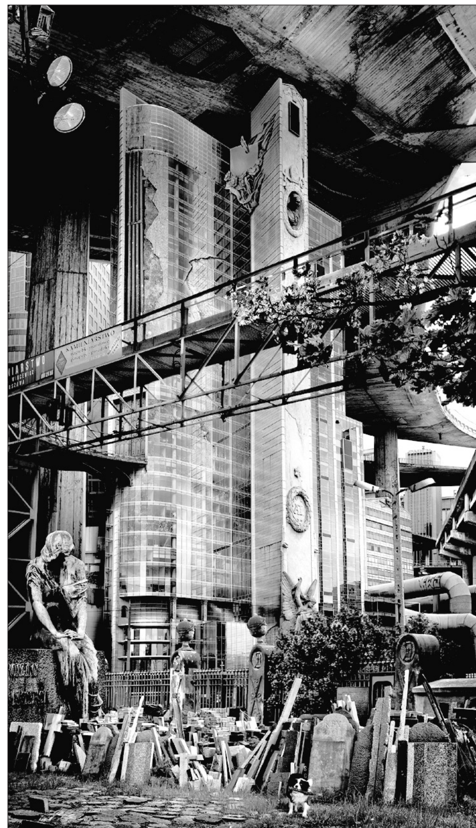
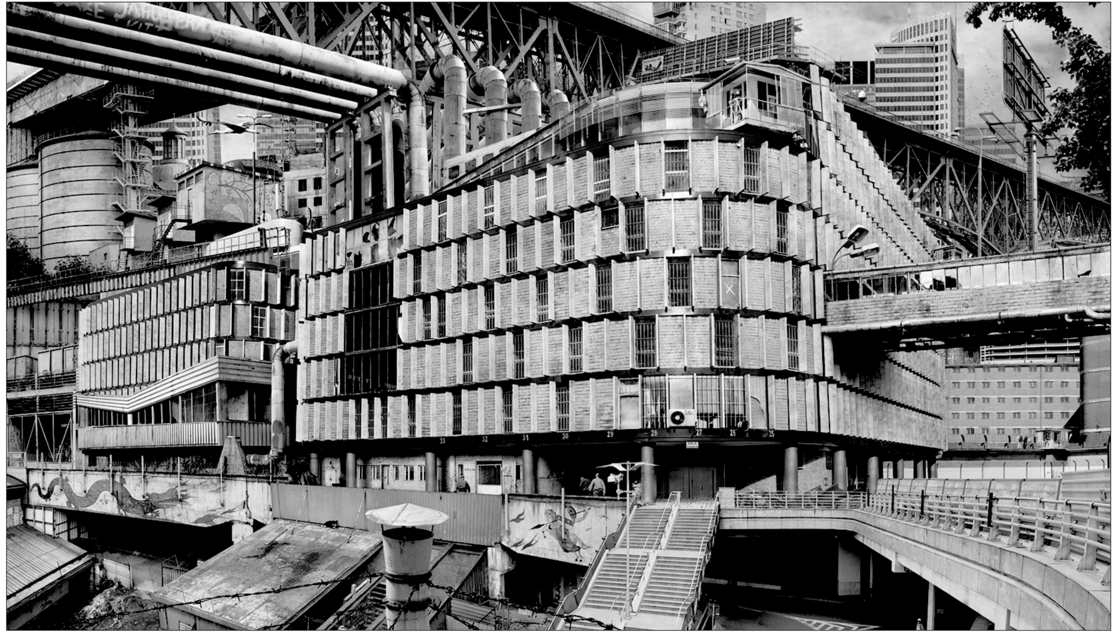


Fig. 6
Above: The RONDO 1 commercial office building completed in 2006, photograph by Grospierre. Left: The RONDO 1 as envisioned by Laksa.

Transformations

The transformations and repurposing shown in Grospierre's and Laksa's images are new concepts in a city where "new" usually means an erasure of the past. Lacking authentic ancient or particularly old structures, Warsaw is "deprived of anything lasting or immortal in its architectural fabric" and has consequently "embraced otherness, impermanence, and liminality as its normal condition" (Zaborowska 2004: 99). Nevertheless, through this cyclical erasure and rewriting of itself (where the "present, may become, perversely, 'eternal' [Smith 2008: 9]), and its awareness of itself as existing in a state of fragility and precariousness, Warsaw is a city that longs for eternity and the longevity of built

Fig. 7. Top
The Metropolitan office building, completed in 2003, photographed by Grospierre. Bottom: The Metropolitan by Laksa.



forms indexical to political and national stability. As a city that has reinvented itself materially many times to suit new political and economic ideologies, it continually struggles to carve out an identity while appealing to foreign sensibilities of, and local desires for, progress. Grospierre's and Laksa's images layer the utopian dreams of past reinventions with a heavy dose of brazen irreverence. Razing the old Warsaw to fill its skyline with Western-style commercial complexes like the one seen in RONDO 1 is met with the same unimpressed criticism that had been generated by the Palace of Culture and Science, a modular and standardized Soviet socialist building erected in the 1950s—a "gift" from Stalin, appropriately nicknamed "Stalin's finger." Such structures inevitably get old, outliving the ideological forces that erected them as symbols of the *plat-du-jour*. These are the bloated and expensive material embodiments of the perpetually "new" regime. As Crowley (2003) notes, Warsaw was both a material reflection of Soviet socialism and it was constructed (and reconstructed) to be a social transformer (15). If architectural projects were a weapon in the arsenal of social control in the socialist era, little has changed today as all the projects selected by the artists again seek to establish a new identity of Warsaw as a site of commercial success. To this point Buck-Morss writes, "If the dreamed-of potential for social transformation remains unrealized, it can teach future generations that history has betrayed them" (2002: xi). The grand spectacles of the socialist urban landscape, designed to evoke a faith in the stability and permanence of socialist values are demolished or discarded as evidential failures, replaced with commercial structures that pay homage to the new idols: New York or London instead of Moscow. By changing the fabric of the Varsovian cityscape, architectural and urban plan-

ners seek to erect totems that penetrate the spirit of the citizens. Such material dressings are fleeting, however, as Grospierre and Laksa intimate in their works. Eventually the past and future catch up to the present and old ways resurface, and new problems arise. A simmering scepticism and distrust in *The Afterlife of Buildings* echoes the sentiment that the more things change, the more they stay the same, echoing the Polish adage *nowe wraca!* meaning, "the new is back again"! (Zaborowska et al. 2004: 6) whereby memory and amnesia act as unrelenting guides to the future.

Like the socialist structures that remain today, these buildings will inevitably sink into the dreary banality of forgotten civic projects—but banality is a key feature of the Warsaw landscape. The dreary banality of a socialist Warsaw with its dull and utilitarian housing blocks has become perhaps what outsiders continue to expect of Warsaw, and the exterior images in *The Afterlife of Buildings* replace the blue, clear skies of the present with ominously overcast and oppressive hues of gray and brown in the future.

Grounding the Future

The obsession with the past is most apparent in artworks concerning the future where nostalgia, reminiscence and memory surface (Roelstraete 2009b). The future becomes a clutter of archived material memories displaced spatially and temporally within the frame. The warmth conjured by nostalgia is curtailed by the uncertainty and instability of a future whose priorities seem idiosyncratic. Like a tourist perusing travel brochures, the viewer seeks to find familiarity, comfort and personal presence in the images. Tourism sells possibilities and ideas, rather than real experiences. The future, as it appears in art, is as unattainable and fantastical as a promised adventure, an elusive experience that banks on the powerful potential of the visual and imaginary rather than the visceral experience of the real (and perhaps less magical) present. It is interesting that the artists have chosen to represent the future using only recent architectural projects. The newness of the buildings selected lends weight to the works as visions of a global future. Older, better known structures are possibly less interesting subjects for futuristic projections because citizens have become accustomed to their repurposing. For example, Warsaw's historic Old Town is not represented in the artworks. There, history has stopped, Crowley argues (2003). It exists as a self-contained timeless place, antithetical to the rest of Warsaw where negotiations of identity, history and place are happening. But it is precisely the newness of buildings like RONDO 1 and the Metropolitan that rattles our sense of future repurposing—such buildings are built to be new; the prospect of their decay and dismantling is unsettling and strange. Postmodern buildings by nature lack a singular, defined mythical past and cannot become the nostalgia of the future because they were built to *be* the future. When hybridized with traces of the past, as the works discussed here, nostalgia is confronted with the problems of the future as much as it is concerned with a resurfacing of the past.

Futuristic landscapes must bind recognizable visual signifiers locating an image in time and space, but there must also exist a system of signification indexical of "futureness." The paradox of futuristic material culture representations is that these signifiers are necessarily representative of the present, since signifiers of the future cannot yet be known. This leads to the problem that all representations of the future are really fixed in the present, and that the past can speak only as an index of future possibilities. The future, to the degree it can be represented visually, is perhaps more akin to nostalgia than to futuristic projections as national memory is the richest source of inspiration for such works. Roelstraete labels this trend as the "historiographic turn in art" among today's artists, in which he sees as an "obsession with archiving, forgetfulness, memoirs and memorials, nostalgia, oblivion, re-enactment, remembrance, reminiscence, retrospection—in short, with the past" (Roelstraete 2009a). By representing the future, the artists may be archiving a mix of assembled inventory of past and possible Varsovian experiences. This fusion is not uncommon in art produced in post-socialist countries. Marciniak argues that the new capitalism has generated hybrid cultures that mix traces of the old socialist experience with the new pleasures provided by a Western lifestyle and that this blending of past, present and future is particularly located in art (2009). However, it is important to locate *The Afterlife of Buildings* as a project which at once breaks with the traditions of politically and socially conscious art that permeated Eastern European art of the socialist era. It must also be seen as removed from the trends of the critical art movement which enveloped the Polish art scene in the 1990s that worked to directly critique, engage and address the Polish political, historical and social situation. Rather, Grospierre's and Laksa's

work firmly represents the current trends in Polish art, where the impact of increased interaction with global networks has become the norm, where artists no longer feel the need or burden to work within the confines of a hermetic Polish context, but instead are freely and unconsciously open to the world and to global conversations.

The Afterlife of Buildings is a warning of a global failure of capitalism, one that happens to be framed through the experiences of Polish history and expressed within the particular story of the cycles of transformation of the city of Warsaw. As a work presented in the context of the Venice Biennale, it offers a portrait of the new Poland for the West to consume. While it addresses global issues such as an unsustainable lifestyle and urban decay, it also reflects upon Polish identity in the face of these global tensions. In these images the artists are at once presenting the achievements of contemporary "Polish" architecture—a showcase of its entrance into capitalist enterprise and newly derived aesthetic diversity—while at the same time mocking this success by imagining a future in which permanent structures decay, where there is an unnerving sense of anarchy, ambivalence and detachment, and where the ghosts of constructed Polishness refuse to be put to rest. These images at once show a dutiful belonging to the West, while also dismantling the possibility of a utopia built on Western values. By claiming that Poland is now Western and that the West cannot sustain itself, Grospierre and Laksa are giving the West a glimpse of *their* future—it is as doomed to fail as socialism. While socialism collapsed in Eastern Europe and the whole world watched the dream falter, perhaps now, rather than be optimistic, the East can all too well imagine the consequences of repurposed monuments and buildings and shattered mythologies. It was fitting that the exhibition was posed as a fictional hotel setting, as it encouraged viewers to tour not only a vision of tomorrow, but also to experience a set of uneasy paradoxes exploring questions of permanence, sacredness and the role of ideologies as they shape the modern cityscape. The future offered in the project was both temporally exotic and aesthetically banal, a glimpse into one society's search for a meaningful future and a snapshot of a forthcoming global condition.

Notes

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1. Varga (2010) can be found at http://merlin.pl/Aleja-Niepodlegloci_Krzysztof-Varga/browse/product/1,763088.html (accessed September 1, 2010).
2. See http://obieg.pl/artmix/4161&ei (accessed August 26, 2010).
3. Crowley is referring to 'Warszawa Funkcjonalna,' a city plan developed by Jan Chmielewski and Szymon Syrkus (1931-1934). The plan proposed that municipal and national boundaries would be dissolved, creating a Warsaw defined by movement through networks—road, rail and rivers—rather than by fixed borders. In this sense, Crowley writes, "Warsaw was not simply projected as a European city: it was to become Europe itself" (2003: 12).
4. For example, see "Paint the Town Red" tours in Warsaw where you can relieve the "good old days" of communism and "enjoy queuing up for bread and toilet paper" at http://www.tours-warsaw.com (accessed August 26, 2010).
5. The critique is titled "Venice Biennale of Architecture: The Polish Pavilion."

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