

Łukasz Bukowiecki
University of Warsaw

**20th century Warsaw museums that never happened:
an urban studies perspective**

(Synopsis of the doctoral dissertation)

The official, „canonical” history of the museum sector consists primarily of the histories of particular institutions – and these are mainly histories of their success. This is because (and it is especially true for Poland), museum history is pursued mainly by museum practitioners themselves. For this reason most of the existing analyses of this subject have a deliberately teleological and finalistic character: history of the institution and its collection or the way exhibitions change are recognized, described and assessed almost exclusively as components of the “genealogy” of existing museums which, in turn, are often treated as the ultimate form of protecting the exhibits and presenting them to the public. For the same reasons the subject of failed undertakings in the history of Polish museum sector has been virtually untouched, even though in the humanities there is essentially already a tradition of thought devoted to various types of “unfinished projects”. In this situation one of the fundamental reasons that inclined me to write the doctoral dissertation was the need to fill in the gap in Polish studies on museum history.

The subject matter however (museums that never happened) is not the only thing that distinguishes my dissertation from the classical museological studies; it is also the methodological approach, linking museums with the city as a physical and cultural space where social actors argue over cultural heritage and so called urban memory.

The crucial tools of understanding urban cultural reality, which I present in the theoretical and methodological introduction are owed primarily to cultural urban studies, that is to the proposition of nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, descriptive research of urban spaces and cultures which was developed in recent years in Polish nonnormative culture studies on the initiative of Ewa Rewers. In this perspective the city becomes one of legitimate research areas of culture studies and urban space is perceived as a product of culture, “configurations of influences of particular urban cultures”. The dissertation’s theoretical framework also includes the output of other research approaches, characteristic for contemporary culture studies, above

all the results of research on collective memory and the conclusions of critical studies on cultural heritage protection.

The main aim of the dissertation is an attempt at finding answers to two complementary research questions about historical and cultural circumstances of unfinished museum projects whose ideas were born in Warsaw in different periods of the 20th century. The first question concerns the reasons for which and the goal to which the concepts of new museums were created. In the second one I ask about why those concepts turned out to be impossible to implement or unnecessary. The attempt to answer the third question is of equal importance: how those “unmaterialized ideas” influence the functioning of the city and its users in our times, that is: what far-reaching consequences the past abandonment brought about and how the social memory (or lack thereof) of it manifests itself. This is because I try to prove that “museums that never happened” that are the subject of my research, still affect cultural memory and social beliefs of Warsaw’s users, as well as the city’s urban layout and institutional landscape. And it is exactly because they have not happened.

In the dissertation I point not only to visions created in architectural or urban planning studios (plans, projects, sketches, drawings with accompanying descriptions of guidelines, explanations and commentaries by experts). This is because I am mainly interested in the concepts that found their expression in various kinds of public texts: in ideological manifestos and (meta)political programmes, in prose and essays, in official documents, civic projects and opinions collected as part of public consultation and finally in comments published in newspapers and broadcast in other media (also in the form of the voice of public opinion).

As a conservative estimate, it can be assumed that in 20th century Warsaw there were between 10 and 20 or even more museums that were publicly demanded, but never created. Out of them I chose three cases for detailed historical and cultural analysis. Despite all the differences, they all have vital common characteristics. Firstly, there is a similarity in the subject matter of the collections and planned exhibitions: all of them were supposed to be public museums devoted to Polish national history (although they obviously differed in intended chronological and factual scope). Secondly, each of the planned museums that I discuss in the dissertation had a specifically defined location in the form of a symbolically controversial historical building, to which the whole concept of founding the museum was fundamentally secondary, serving as a pretext for converting, transforming or even reconstructing the edifice.

This research area contains: 1) the concept of converting the former orthodox saint Alexander Nevsky cathedral on Saxon Square (now Piłsudski Square) into a “civil treasury of

the nation”, as suggested by Stefan Żeromski in the ending of his 1918 narrative poem “Wisła”; 2) plans that kept changing in the consecutive decades of People’s Poland (the PRL) to reconstruct the Royal Castle and use it as a location for the Polish Culture Museum, the Millennium Museum or the Pantheon of National History and Culture, and 3) the initiative to locate the “museum of communism” in the Palace of Culture and Science, which evolved from Ewa Graczyk’s originally literary vision (the essay “PRL exhibition in the Palace of Culture” which circulated in Polish samizdat in the 1980s in typescript, published for the first time in 1989) into the architectural design of the Communism Memorial Museum SocLand developed at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries in Czesław Bielecki’s studio, but also endorsed by Andrzej Wajda and Jacek Fedorowicz.

The notion that all museum concepts analysed in the dissertation have in common, is the reference to the “negative heritage” (Lynn Meskell) and the idea to intercept an edifice that is “iconic” for a given age (the partitions, the pre-socialistic period and communist period respectively) during the times of turning points that ended it (1918, 1945, 1989). What distinguishes the cases is different reasons (discussed in the analytical chapters) to abandon the intention, showing the dynamics of changes in the social and cultural reality.

The dispute over Communism Memorial Museum SocLand and its location, presented in Chapter 1, is treated as a testimony to the conflict between interpretive communities differing in both the evaluation of the heritage of People’s Poland’s era, and concepts of its adaptation after 1989. Chapter 2 is devoted to a number of unrealized pretext-museums whose creation was suggested with varying intensity in consecutive decades of the PRL as the justification for the paradoxical postwar reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw. In Chapter 3 I confront the history of gradual transformation of Saxon Square into a shrine to national memory with the utopian 1918 literary vision according to which the orthodox church that stood on this square at the time should have been preserved and used as a museum of national historical mementos – a museum that has not been built either there, or anywhere else.

Because the starting point for my analyses – discussed in detail in the sections that connect consecutive chapters – is contemporary social practices of constructing cultural heritage and collective memory of 20th century history of Warsaw, supported (or not) by traces of the past retained in the city’s physical space, and by narrative testimonies, I decided to use an “archaeological” and not “chronological” order of analytical chapters. Arranging the dissertation in such a way also allows historically earlier examples – treated as reference material – to explain the most recent case discussed in the beginning (SocLand) which is the

most complex of them all, and which, at the same time, stays unconcluded (there is still some chance of its implementation).

While analysing examples of museums that never happened, I wanted to have a closer look at the discussions on the rights and obligations of Warsaw as the capital of Poland, which were conducted with varied intensity throughout almost the whole last century. In this context I was especially interested in tensions between the multicultural heritage and plans of monocultural (national) ideologization of public space, as well as negotiating the “centre” of Warsaw: a downtown area which, at the same time, would be a symbolic “heart of the country”: a representative and representational expression of achievements and aspirations of the whole society, and, at the same time, a monument to their collective self-identification and self-projection.

In the dissertation I wanted to prove that, on the base of the history of selected Warsaw museums that never happened (in spite of being planned), valid conclusions can be made as to what are the changes in mentality patterns and cultural practices that shape social imaginaries of the city’s past. This way I wanted to introduce a set of issues that Polish cultural studies have not yet taken up, that is relations between museums and cities and, in consequence, to make an attempt at formulating initial principles of a new research perspective, critically and discursively analysing the phenomena of cultural policy in broad sense of the term, and their relations to the city’s physical and cultural space.