

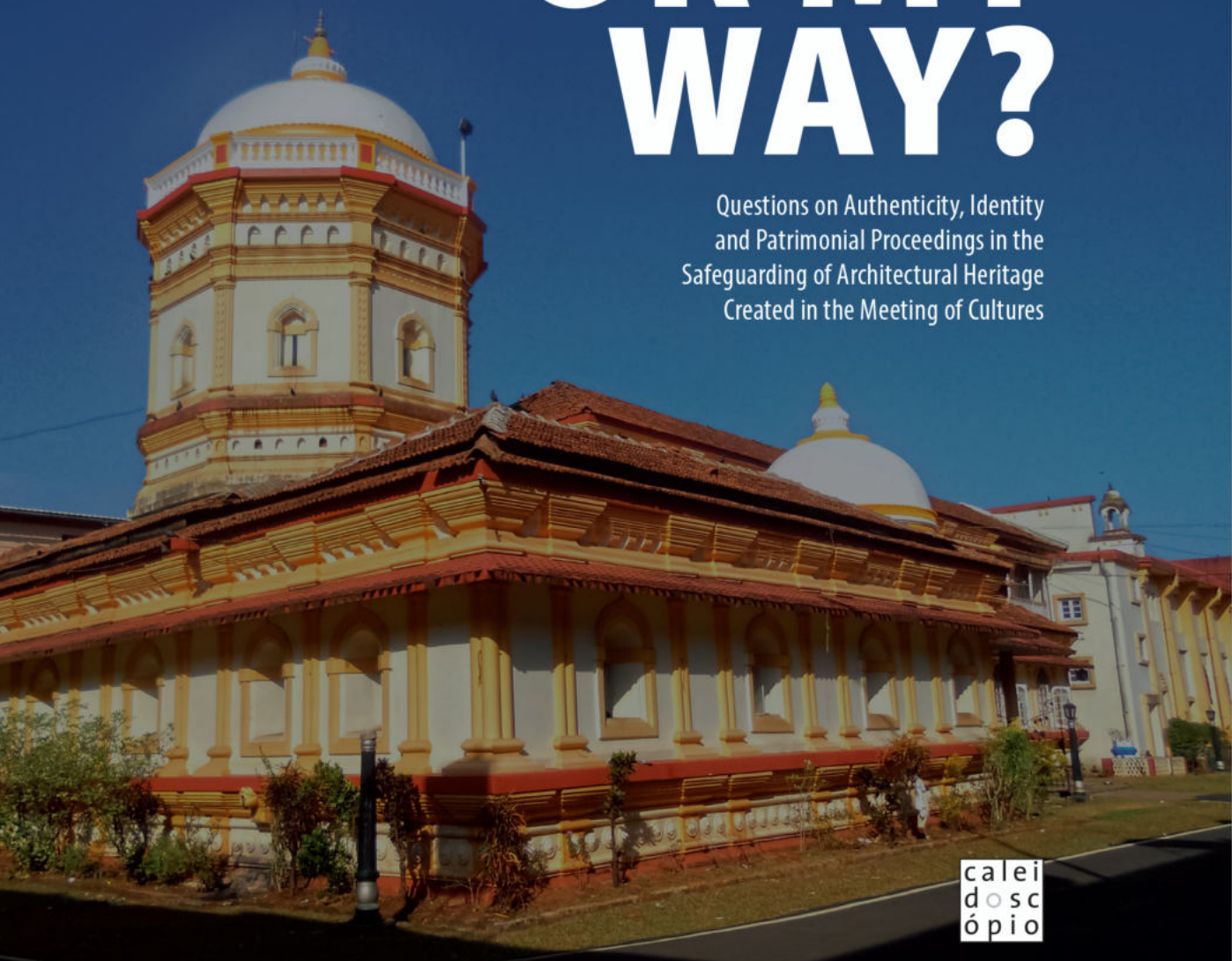
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**PRESERVING TRANSCULTURAL HERITAGE**

# **YOUR WAY OR MY WAY?**

Questions on Authenticity, Identity  
and Patrimonial Proceedings in the  
Safeguarding of Architectural Heritage  
Created in the Meeting of Cultures

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Created in the Meeting of Cultures



## TITLE

Preserving Transcultural Heritage: Your Way or my Way?  
Questions on Authenticity, Identity and Patrimonial Proceedings in the Safeguarding of Architectural Heritage Created in the Meeting of Cultures

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# CONTEXTUALIZING THE HERITAGE OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME IN POLAND: NEW NARRATIVES

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## **ABSTRACT:**

*This article concerns the recent strategies adopted to deal with the heritage of Polish culture from the communist period. These strategies include: a growing interest from the point of view of monument protection authorities and artistic associations in the architecture of the Polish People's Republic, the educational activities of newly-established thematic museums and commercial events that invoke nostalgia for the past. After 1989 the problem of the presence of symbols of Soviet domination emerged, many of them have been systematically removed from the landscape, yet the issue of their future has maintained its importance. This issue leads to the question of a moral assessment of architectonic heritage.*

## **KEYWORDS:**

*post-socialist heritage; cultural heritage; museums of the Polish People's Republic; monument protection*

## An assessment of 'undesired' heritage

After 1945 Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe found themselves within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. This came about as a result of the resolutions of the Yalta Conference. The seizure of power by the communist regime not only caused the enforcement of Soviet economic models, such as a centrally planned economy, it also touched other areas of life such as architecture and art. Numerous monuments of Gratitude to the Red Army and communist pseudo-heroes appeared in the public space. In this period, called socialist realism – or soc-realism for short, the Palace of Culture and Science (1952-1955) was built in the centre of Warsaw. The facility was constructed according to a design proposed by Soviet architect Lev Rudnev<sup>1</sup>. It was a humiliating 'gift from the Soviet nation to Poland' and was named after Stalin. After the political transformation of 1989, the removal of the obvious symbols of Soviet domination between 1945 and 1989 occurred in every Polish city on a massive scale. Public facilities, that had served the communist regime, for instance, as headquarters of the Houses of the Party, were given a new designation and utilitarian functions. Many of the existing communist monuments were also dismantled under the guise of, for example, new investment.

The general public debate over the future of the 'wrongfully born' heritage, except for the simple question of keeping it or not, raises the need for a specific debate about the issue of a moral assessment of architectonic heritage and heritage in general. Uffe Juul Jensen has noted that cultural heritage is something that is received in a fixed form. A simple analogy between cultural heritage and heritage in the sense of inheritance has its limitations. The cultural heritage is a composition of carefully selected elements, constructed as a result of 'negotiations' between the heirs (Jensen 2000, 38). Thus, in given circumstances, heritage can turn into a dangerous tool that generates tensions and conflicts. A British historian Eric Hobsbawm warned us against that and noticed that 'as poppies are the raw material of heroin addiction, history is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies. Heritage is an essential, perhaps the essential, element in these ideologies' (Hobsbawm 1993, 62-4). This proves the assertion that even using, as it may seem, neutral, material objects, as elements of cultural heritage will not allow us to avoid the construction of a certain narrative even by their selection and the manner in which they are presented.

In the context of the 'undesired' heritage of the communist era it is valid to take note of how important it is to reflect on the consequences of strategies which are based on the destruction or conversion of architectonic remains of the previous epoch. Apart from the utilitarian and artistic value of the objects and their décor an important question is the issue of the non-materialistic need to pass knowledge and experience to future generations. A strong relationship between 'those who went before and those who come after, with concomitant notions of responsibility and "holding in trust" ' (Pearce 2000, 59) results from the simplest characteristics of heritage. The heritage that is passed down from generation to generation not only provides a description of the past but also marks out a path for the perspective of the present and future generations<sup>2</sup>.

## Can post-war architecture ever be considered a historical treasure?

The passage of time is working in favour of the objective assessment of the cultural heritage of the era of the Polish People's Republic (PPR). The perception of the architecture of this period has recently gone through considerable changes. The circle of its enthusiasts is expanding. New lists of architectural objects which are recognized as 'goods of the contemporary culture' are being created under the auspices of monument protection authorities at both the city and province level. The charm of the architecture from the period of soc-realism and late modernism is a controversial issue for many people. However, we can take for granted the fact that whatever was built in the era of communism represents at least some value. The architects of that period proposed very interesting functional and artistic solutions, especially when it came to landscape design. Recently, the most urgent issue has become the question of how to protect this heritage with viable conservation. Inclusion on the list of representatives of contemporary culture is apparently not a tool that has the authority to protect the objects from demolition by law. Usually this occurs due to the endeavours of potential investors and their determination to secure a profitable location for a facility that would work in favour of a new investment. This kind of protection is provided by the *Act of 23 July, 2003 on the protection of monuments and the guardianship of monuments*. From the perspective of this Act, an object which is listed as representative of contemporary culture can be treated as a proposition and suggestion for the planners and architects who are in charge of the development of a given area. As Andrzej Siwek has noted, there are some paradoxical situations when a recognized representative of culture has first to be removed from the list to be efficiently protected by assigning it to the Register of objects of cultural heritage. In this light, the lists of representatives of contemporary culture, which are prepared by artistic associations or local councils, 'gain a new character, instead of being seen as merely suggestions for the planners, they are placed in a type of *waiting room*' for the Register of Objects of Cultural Heritage (Siwek 2011, 9).

The revitalization of the facilities that are in poor condition is still a burning issue. The buildings that are worth preserving need to be renovated. Apart from the need, alluded to earlier, for updating the law to enable real restoration activity, which would include more than just conservation, in the field of protecting the representatives of contemporary heritage there is another issue that arises. This particular issue is the question of estimating the artistic, scientific and historic value of the objects. To solve this problem it is necessary to create tools that will allow decision makers to be objective when estimating and comparing particular works of art and to create categories such as, for instance, unique objects (i.e. Tourists House PTTK in Zakopane, 1953-1956, a representative of the regional style), or objects which are a representation of the European architectonic trends (i.e. Our Lady Queen of Poland Church in Nowa Huta, Cracow, 1967-1977, which was inspired by the projects of Le Corbusier). New criteria, which are clear insofar as this is possible, taking into consideration the subjective nature of the matter, will allow for the minimization of the spontaneity and randomness of the aesthetic assessment and making decisions about the conservation of the objects on sight (Siwek 2011, 10). The vivid discussion, developed after 1945, over the conservation and protection of architecture, proves the growing interest in this subject. An international conference entitled; *A register of the monuments or a*

*list of representatives of contemporary culture: the status of the representatives of contemporary culture, how to protect and how to restore the architectonic and urban objects* has been organized by the Association of Polish Architects in May 2006 in Warsaw<sup>3</sup>.

A widespread awareness of the importance of pre-war modernist architecture is already strongly embedded. It features prominently in the Register of Objects of Cultural Heritage. The last decade has witnessed a growing fascination with post-war modernism, it is treated as a kind of a continuation of style connecting the pre-war phenomena, and the architecture of socialist realism. Particular objects, which represent the second style, are gradually lengthening the Register. Thus far, the biggest dispute has been caused by the acknowledgment of the importance of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, which was included in the register in 2007. The viewpoints from artistic circles, but also from various professional groups and the media were strongly polarized. There were strong critical voices ranged against the decisions of the Voivodeship Office for the Preservation of Objects of Cultural Heritage in Warsaw.

## **Museums of fine art and daily life in the Polish People's Republic**

Institutions that have the character of museums and private initiatives coordinated by foundations play an important role in the discussion about the new strategies of presenting the culture and art of the communist era. The way they conduct themselves matches the recent tendencies in the theoretical analysis of museology. Mieke Bal points out that there is a kind of discourse that is inherently connected with the museum's narration. She also emphasizes that each exhibition is an utterance created within the framework of a given discourse, that 'deprives the museal practice of its innocence' (Bal 1996, 214).

Katarzyna Jagodzińska, a Polish scholar who examined the situation of museums in East-Central Europe after the democratic transition, points out the fact that the understanding of the term 'museum' has changed during the last twenty years, not only in the East-Central part of the continent (Jagodzińska 2014, 345). The 'closed' museum of the old type, which concentrated on collecting and exhibiting its own collection transformed into an 'open' museum. Visitors are the most important element of the 'open' museum; these institutions go to great lengths in order to establish the relationship between the spectator and the institution. Nowadays museums are not just institutions occupying a building; they are quite often a mental construct exceeding the physical limits of the institution.

Another factor that has gained in importance from the 1970s is the educational function of the institutions. Many programmes dedicated to diverse age groups have been created. Usually they accompany temporary events but they can also be a permanent element of the museum's offer. Nowadays museums often use the museum-forum pattern, they frequently engage in public debate and present important issues for our society including the controversial ones. This idea is closer to the idea of the 'critical museum' proposed by Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski. He made an attempt to realize his vision between 2009 and 2010 within the programme of the National Museum in Warsaw. At that time he was the director of the museum (Piotrowski 2011). According to Piotrowski we can say that the main aim of these institutions should not just be documenting the

history and the artefacts of the past but also depicting the world in an engaging way and presenting it 'in a kind of a mirror created by the institutions'. An 'open' museum gains a new participational character where the visitor co-creates the exhibition and is encouraged to take action.

The new understanding of the function of the museum corresponds with the activity of the cultural institutions, which will be discussed below. These institutions will include not only state organizations financed by the government but also those run by private foundations.

### **The Socialist Realism Art Gallery in Kozłówka**

The Socialist Realism Art Gallery which is a part of the Museum of the Zamoyski Family in Kozłówka is the oldest and the only institution that amasses and presents the art of soc-realism in Poland. The late baroque palace from the eighteenth century which belonged to the aristocratic family of Zamoyski luckily survived the Second World War, the German invasion and the no less devastating liberation by the Red Army, without any damage. The Palace was nationalized by virtue of The Decree of Agricultural Reform and in November 1944 was turned into the first museum established in Polish territory after liberation from German occupation. Between 1954 and 1977 the Palace served as the Central Museum Storehouse (Fic-Lazor 2011, 170). From this time, and especially from the time of the 'Thaw' of 1956, Kozłówka started to gather new soc-realistic sculptures, paintings, graphics and posters from the whole country. At present, the collection comprises over 1500 objects. This collection gave rise to what is today called the Socialist Realism Art Gallery, which was opened in 1992 on the initiative of the director of the Museum at that time, Krzysztof Kornacki. The Gallery was opened in the building of the former carriage house. After 1989 a couple of other monuments, which till that time, were ordinarily located outdoors, found their places in this institution. Among others, the monument of Lenin created by Russian artist Dymitr Szwarc (Image 1) was brought to the Museum from Poronin after the decommissioning of a museum which was dedicated to the leader of the Revolution (1990). The recent arrangement of an exposition by the Gallery from 2004 has quite a conventional character. The presented works of art were grouped according to different themes, which characterized the social, political and economic situation of Poland of that time. The role of art is purely illustrative.

This situation is soon to be changed. Sławomir Grzechnik, the manager of the Department of the Collection of the Art of Social Realism, in March 2016 announced his plans for the establishment of the new Gallery, which is to be allocated a building adapted for this purpose, the former stable (Grzechnik 2016). The proposed concept clearly enhances the educational aspect of the Gallery. The new expository space will allow for the use of multimedia which will support the emphasis of the role of art from that time as a tool used for the proper shaping of the socialist society, which was by its nature an important facet of the propaganda of the communist regime. The narration of the new exhibition has to be made clear to the visitor; it needs to be enriched with numerous digressions which will build a picture of the historical and social background.

As was mentioned before, the educational function of the contemporary museum is a very important aspect. It was probably the essential value in the case of the aforementioned



institutions. As Maria Todorova has noted, people who can remember the early days of communism have either already passed or will pass soon. The younger generation, whose youth occurred between the 1960s and the 1980s, are preoccupied with contemporary problems, generated by the neoliberal reality and are 'actively forgetting' the past (Todorova 2014, 7). The gradual disappearance of the communist era artefacts from the most immediate human habitat can also be counted as an element of this process. These came into being in the period of our interest but are now seen as old, unappealing and impractical. That is why it is so vital to collect not only the memories and oral traditions of the participants in the communist reality, which for historians are interesting considering the oppressiveness of this system, but also the everyday items.

The possibility of direct contact with the objects which in a way 'belong' to the previous epoch can help in its contemporary description and interpretation. Often enough, the generation of people who are in their forties or fifties encounter problems with explaining to their children what the communist reality was like, why they had to stand in long queues to buy some bread, why they had to sign up for new furniture which they received after a couple of years or what was the purpose of the rationing of individual rolls of toilet paper, which could only be bought after long hours spent standing in line.

### **Muzeum PRL-u (eng. The Museum of the Polish People's Republic) in Ruda Śląska**

The creators of the Museum of the PPR in Ruda Śląska decided to confront these problems. It is a private institution, which was first opened to visitors in 2010 by Fundacja Minionej Epoki (Foundation of the Previous Epoch). Monika Żywot, the director of the Foundation, on the advice of Krzysztof Kornacki, the director of the Museum of the Zamoycki Family in Kozłówka, decided to reconstruct the surroundings of daily life for an ordinary Polish citizen who lived in this reality between 1945 and 1989<sup>4</sup>.

The starting point for the conception of the museum programme is the assumption that in the course of the next ten, fifteen years it may be impossible to gather the necessary items. It is probable that they will disappear into waste dumps in the coming years.

The founders of the institution undertook restoration and adaptation works on a former farm, established at the end of the nineteenth century by the von Ballestrem family, a German noble family from Silesia. After the Second World War the farm was nationalized and as the property of the State Treasury was turned into the State Agricultural Farm (pol. PGR). After the liquidation of the PGR its facilities were allowed to fall into ruin till such a time when the new owners started to revitalize the buildings. Thanks to these efforts the museum gained new spacious premises ready for expositions.

From the very beginning the museum attracted a high level of interest from visitors. This interest has been fostered by the diversity of the activities offered by the institution. Within the project 'Time Capsule' there are interior designs presented, which are changed every season (Image 2). Each stylization is characteristic of one decade from this 40-year long period of communism in Poland.

There are temporary thematic expositions organized each year, too. They create an inspiring background for museum lectures, which are presented in co-operation with local historians and employees of the Institute of National Remembrance in Katowice.

What is more, the Museum owns an extensive collection of cars (Image 3), posters and even some monuments which were sent there after the communist heroes were successfully knocked off their pedestals<sup>5</sup>.

The foundation declaration of the Museum of PPR emphasizes the will to build the fullest possible picture of this difficult epoch for the Polish people. This is a message which is aimed at young people who can learn the truth about the events of that time, the lifestyle and living conditions in which their parents and grandparents grew up. It is also a good opportunity to remind the older section of society what their youth was like. The picture that arises does not impose a black-and-white interpretation of the era. Many humorous and grotesque stories which are known from the comedies of that period are mentioned but also, considerable attention is paid to commemorating the oppressiveness of the past system.

### **Muzeum PRL-u (eng. Museum of Poland under the Communist Regime) in Cracow (Nowa Huta)**

A Polish film director, Andrzej Wajda, with his wife Krystyna Zachwatowicz and their SocLand Foundation have striven for many years to create the Museum of Poland under the Communist Regime in Cracow or in Warsaw. This initiative, however, did not succeed. The idea resurfaced after the City of Cracow acquired a so-called building of the former Cinema Światowid (Image 4). This facility was situated in the Nowa Huta district, a district which was built from scratch as a city for the employees of the metallurgical factory – Vladimir Lenin Steelworks, established in 1954. The museum commenced its activities in 2008 as an affiliate of the Museum of Polish History and from 2013 as an independent city institution which is partially financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Since the Museum does not own any permanent exposition, according to the Act of 21 November 1996 *on Museums*, it formally has the status of being established only as long as the work on the adaptation of the Światowid Cinema is not finished<sup>6</sup>.

It is possible that the non-defined status of the museum emboldens the institution to engage in an interesting dialogue with visitors who, following the recent strategies of the open museum, not only can affect the temporary exposition *via* interaction with it but in this case are also allowed to co-create the programme frames of the whole institution. In the summer of 2014 almost 200 people were interviewed with a questionnaire, specially prepared for this purpose and thematically varied. The most important issues concerned the expectations of the interviewee regarding the target audience of the museum and their associations with the communist period. The outcomes of the questionnaire proved that there is a huge interest in the widely understood customs and daily life in the PPR.

Despite the difficulties of the formal nature the Museum of PPR in the Nowa Huta district of Cracow, it continues to provide vivid exhibitionary and educational activities. It gathers collections (Image 5, 6), organizes lectures, museum lessons, competitions, workshops for children and screenings of movies, and creates routes for the thematic trips. It has the potential to become the most important institution in Poland which describes the communist reality in so many aspects.

### **Czar PRL Museum (eng. Charm of PPR) in Warsaw**

Another strategy is represented by the Charm of PPR Museum, the final institution to be discussed here; it is one of the business activities of the tourist company Adventure Warsaw, established in 2009. The museum area (circa 100m<sup>2</sup>) is jam-packed with a permanent exposition, it follows the pattern of the Ruda Śląska Museum in that it attempts to be a museum representing life in the previous epoch. Thematically varied interiors are intended to create an attractive background for the storytelling that takes place during the hours-long walk around Warsaw, because the main form of the company's activities is the organization of non-standard trips around the Polish capital<sup>7</sup>. The participants in the trips discover the city while travelling in old Nysa vans or in an iconic bus from the period: Jelcz 043, which due to its shape was affectionately called 'cucumber'. Both vehicles are no longer produced.

The interest in this form of learning about the communist past of Warsaw is intense, and not only among the tourists from Western Europe. This opportunity to experience life in the past is also used by the residents of the city of Warsaw who have the possibility to use the other commercial offers of Adventure Warsaw, such as: the organization of company events or private parties (for example hen parties, stag nights) or hiring vintage cars. It is worth noting that the team that is engaged in the company is a group of young people who do not know this communist reality from experience. This personal fascination and the desire to discover the architecture – unknown to them before – led the authors of this initiative to take action.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural heritage is a construct which is created by consecutive generations. For that reason a balanced and multidimensional discourse is so important in any discussion concerning the difficult period of the communist domination in our country. The meaning and consequences of the construction of this narration *via* discarding and forgetting the relics of the previous epoch needs to be reconsidered. We cannot allow a defective memory of the past to shape it into something incomprehensible and abstract.

Nowadays, the supremacy of the attitudes of the rebuff and negation of the unwanted past are far behind us. There is a new narrative in the attitude towards the heritage of the communist period in Poland. The architecture of that period is beginning to be perceived as valuable, there have been lists of representatives of the contemporary culture created, some objects are protected by the Register. The recently established museums of PPR focus on the presentation of the reality of that period. They educate *via* exhibitions, meetings and commercial events which are gaining more and more popularity among Polish and foreign tourists.

The survey conducted among the visitors to the Nowa Huta museum proves, as was intuitively expected, that the keenest interest of the people is awakened by the misconstrued customs and daily life in the communist period. According to interviewees the political issues are not so worthwhile. Nevertheless, they cannot be ignored given that the heart of transmitting knowledge to the next generations lies in the ability of building an honest narrative about history, a narrative that will allow for a better understanding of the present reality, producing a new perspective for the future at the same time.



Image 1 - Lenin monument, by Dymitr Szwarc, Socialist Realism Art Gallery in Kozłówka, Zamoyski Museum (photo by K. Mazur)



Image 2 – Interior of 1960s. Muzeum PRL in Ruda Śląska (source: <http://www.muzeumprl-u.pl>)  
Image 3 – Polish cars from 1960s. Muzeum PRL in Ruda Śląska (source: <http://www.muzeumprl-u.pl>)



Image 4 - Former Światowid cinema building in Nowa Huta, Cracow, postcard. (source: <http://www.mprl.pl/>)

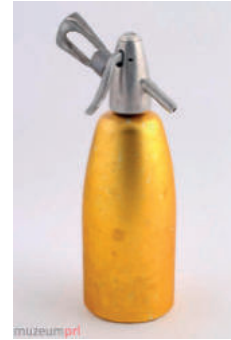


Image 5 - Hot water bottle. from the collection of Muzeum PRL in Cracow (source: <http://www.mprl.pl/>).

Image 6 - Soda siphon. from the collection of Muzeum PRL in Cracow (source: <http://www.mprl.pl/>)

## Notes

- 1 Lev Vladimirovich Rudnev (Russian: Лев Владимирович Руднев, 1885-1956), an alumnus of the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg, he designed the main building of Moscow State University (1949-1953), one of Stalin's seven skyscrapers in Moscow for which he was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1949. The form of the Palace of Culture and Science refers to this building. More about Stalinist architecture i.e. Хмельницкий 2007.
- 2 The issue of post-socialist heritage and urban identity of Polish cities is an important research problem at the moment (see i.e.: Czepczyński 2008; Young, Kaczmarek 2008; Balockaite 2012).
- 3 *Rejestr zabytków, czy lista dóbr kultury współczesnej; Status dóbr kultury współczesnej, jak chronić i odnawiać obiekty architektoniczne i urbanistyczne*. Materiały międzynarodowej konferencji SARP, Warszawa 11-12 maja 2006, Warszawa 2006.
- 4 Interview with Monika Żywot.
- 5 <http://www.muzeumprl-u.pl>, [accessed 10 October 2016].
- 6 See: Światowid journal, Museum Publishing house.
- 7 See: <http://adventurewarsaw.pl>, [accessed 10 October 2016]

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