



**Andrzej Sobolewski\*, Roman Czajka\*\***

## *Zachód II housing estate in Szczepin in Wrocław – a place built anew*

### *Introduction*

Wrocław is one of the cities tragically experienced by the World War II. In August 1944, the city was proclaimed a fortress – Festung Breslau. The order issued by the military authorities ordered the city to be defended unconditionally until the last soldier, which meant, in the context of the approaching defeat of Nazi Germany, a cruel sentence and the destruction of the Silesian metropolis. Its fate was sealed by the fierce fights between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army and the Soviet air raids in April 1945<sup>1</sup>. About 70% of the buildings were seriously damaged or completely demolished. Breslau capitulated on 6 May, four days after Berlin surrendered.

As a result of the Potsdam Conference (July/August 1945) on the division of post-war Europe, Lower Silesia and its capital were granted to Poland. After several centuries, Wrocław became a Polish city again<sup>2</sup>. There was a complete replacement of the population, which was certainly a traumatic experience for both old and new residents. The German population, who did not leave the city before the siege of Festung Breslau (most of the civilians were forcibly evacuated from the city in January 1945), were relocated to the Soviet occupation zone in Germany. Poles began to arrive in the devastated Wrocław, mainly from the central part of the country and from Greater Poland.

A significant part of the new inhabitants of Wrocław were displaced inhabitants of the former Eastern Borderlands of pre-war Poland. In 1939, before the outbreak of World War II, the population of Breslau was less than 640,000 people. In 1946, the Polish city of Wrocław “started” from the level of approximately 170,000 residents.

The great reconstruction of the city has begun. In a completely new geopolitical situation in this part of Europe, the future of Wrocław, Lower Silesia, or the whole of the so-called Recovered Territories became part of the state political game of communist authorities. As the priority was to rebuild the capital of the country, it was not planned to reactivate Wrocław on a metropolitan scale. *Due to considerable damage, it was initially planned – as Przemysław Dudek wrote – to rebuild [the capital of Lower Silesia] as a city with a population of 200,000. It was supposed to cease to function as an industrial center. On a supra-regional scale, it would only remain a cultural, educational (due to the University and the University of Technology) and tourist center (thanks to the proximity of the Sudetes and health resorts). A small concentration of light industries, such as food and confectionery, was also expected. Wrocław was not and could not be a metropolis* [1, pp. 60, 61]. Luckily for the city, its successive stages of reconstruction and development quickly verified the original assumptions.

As in other urban centers which were particularly painfully affected by the war, becoming more or less ruins, Wrocław also had to face a fundamental dilemma related to its reconstruction strategy. Questions were asked about the scale of the reconstruction of the pre-war, historic urban and architectural structure, and at the same time wondering about the degree to which the city had to be rebuilt. The most damaged areas were southern and western districts of Wrocław, including the Szczepin housing estate, the transformations of which will be discussed later in the article.

\* ORCID: 0000-0002-2802-9388. Faculty of Architecture, Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Poland, e-mail: andrzej.sobolewski@pwr.edu.pl

\*\* ORCID: 0000-0003-0318-3140. Faculty of Architecture, Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Poland.

<sup>1</sup> On the night of April 1–2, 1945, 750 Soviet aircraft began mass air raids and bombing Breslau. Incendiary and high explosive bombs have ruined the city.

<sup>2</sup> In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Wrocław came under the rule of the King of Bohemia, and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century it became part of the Habsburg monarchy.

### *The state of the research*

Szczepin as a historical part of Wrocław's Przedmieście Mikołajskie (Nicholas Suburb) was described in works on the spatial development of the city. One of the earlier studies on this topic was a book by Zygmunt Antkowiak titled *Stare i nowe osiedla Wrocławia* [Old and New Estates of Wrocław] [2]. The summary of contemporary research was in turn a collective work edited by Halina Okólska, entitled *Przedmieście Mikołajskie we Wrocławiu* [Mikołajskie Suburb in Wrocław], which contained articles showing the pre- and post-war history of the western part of Wrocław's inner city [3], [4]. The volume also includes a sketch of post-war Szczepin development by Agata Gabiś [5] and an essay by Małgorzata Górńska on the modernist Siedlung Westend housing estate designed by Theo Effenberger [6]. It is worth mentioning that part of the described housing estate is one of the few groups of buildings in Szczepin that survived the destruction of the city in 1945.

So far, several studies on the post-war reconstruction of Wrocław, including its western part with Szczepin, have been published. Of particular note is one of the latest publications of the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław: *Cale morze budowania. Wrocławska architektura 1956–1970* [The sea of construction. Architecture of Wrocław 1956–1970] [7], by aforementioned Gabiś. A Wrocław-Szczepin thread was also included by Anna Cymer in her monumental work about the post-war architecture of the Polish People's Republic: *Architektura w Polsce 1945–1989* [The architecture of Poland 1945–1989] [8]. It is about one of the most recognizable buildings from that period, i.e., Dolnośląskie Centrum Diagnostyki Medycznej Dolmed. This characteristic inverted "pyramid", icon not only of Szczepin, but also of Wrocław, was also described by Agnieszka Tomaszewicz and Joanna Majczyk in the work devoted to its creators, Anna and Jerzy Tarnawski [9].

The new large-panel buildings of Szczepin and its inhabitants were included in the interdisciplinary, comprehensive research conducted as part of a project implementing a public task commissioned by the Municipality of Wrocław in 2015 (29.07.2015/1647). Their aim was to draw up a description of the functioning of Wrocław's housing estates mainly in social and spatial aspects. The results of the research were published in the work *Analiza funkcjonalna osiedli Wrocławia* [Functional Analysis of Wrocław Estates], edited by Izabela Mironowicz [10].

Szczepin was also included in the monograph *Struktura przestrzenna i społeczna terenów rekreacyjnych w osiedlach mieszkaniowych Wrocławia z lat 70.–80 ubiegłego stulecia*. [The Spatial and Social Structure of Recreational Areas in Residential Estates of Wrocław in the 1970s–1980s] by Aleksandra Lis [11]. The work concerns the residential environment in the context of the presence of green and recreational areas, which are a very important element of spatial development in the Zachód II housing estate. Anna Podolska and Aleksandra Dul took up a similar topic in their publication: *Przestrzenie rekreacyjne na osiedlu mieszkaniowym Szczepin we Wrocławiu – analiza stanu zagospodarowania, użytkowników i form*

*aktywności* [Recreational spaces in the Szczepin housing estate in Wrocław – analysis of the state of development, users and forms of activity] [12]. Szczepin housing estate Zachód II, the main subject of this article, was also the subject of research in the aspect of transformation and adaptation of blocks of flats to the needs of the elderly, the results of which were published in the monograph by Barbara Gronostajska entitled *Kształtowanie środowiska mieszkaniowego dla seniorów* [Shaping the Housing Environment for Seniors] [13].

The presented literature review shows that the work of the main designers of the Zachód II estate – Witold Moliński and his wife Maria Molińska – still constitutes a wide field of research.

### *Szczepin housing estate and its development before the 1945*

Today Szczepin (German: *Tschepine*) is a Wrocław housing estate located just beyond the western border of the Old Town, which is emphasized by the old town moat. The administrative division between the old town center of Wrocław and Szczepin is marked by Jana Pawła II Square (formerly 1 Maja Square), which also clearly separates the two different faces of the post-war city – the preserved or rebuilt structure of the historic old town with the dominant dense quarter buildings and the newly shaped vast districts of the western part Wrocław.

Szczepin was founded in the Middle Ages, and due to the vicinity of the Odra River, it was mentioned at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a fishing village, and it retained its character for the next several centuries. Interestingly, at the time when Wrocław was a German city, Szczepin was largely inhabited by the Polish population. Even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the area was called Polnische Vorstadt – Polish Suburb [14, p. 319]. The settlement developed along the existing two main communication routes – the first of them, leading to Leśnica, Legnica, and then to Frankfurt on the Oder, became after the village was joined to the city by Friedrich-Wilhelm-Straße<sup>3</sup>, and after 1945 – by Legnicka, one of the most important arteries of contemporary Wrocław. The second road, then called Lange Gasse, is now Długa Street. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Szczepin, along with the entire Przedmieście Mikołajskie, was incorporated into the city<sup>4</sup>, but the integration of the new districts was slow – for several dozen years, Szczepin was dominated by rural buildings. Only Friedrich-Wilhelm-Straße, as the main exit road to the west from the city, was paved and enclosed with multi-storey tenement houses.

The development of the western part of Wrocław gained momentum in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Two railway stations

<sup>3</sup> On Endler's plan from 1807, the area along the present Legnicka Street is marked as Nicolai Vorstadt (Nicholas Suburb).

<sup>4</sup> The annexation of Przedmieście Mikołajskie and other suburbs to Wrocław took place in 1808 after the demolition, on the orders of Jerome Bonaparte, of the city walls, which limited the spatial development of the city (Napoleon's army captured Wrocław in 1807 during the Prussian-French war).



Fig. 1. Wrocław, Legnicka Street and Strzegomski Square with the church of St. Paul, 1930s (source: own collection)

Il. 1. Wrocław, ul. Legnicka i plac Strzegomski z kościołem św. Pawła, lata 30. XX w. (źródło: zbiory własne)



Fig. 2. Wrocław, former Siedlung Westend, contemporary view, Ślubicka Street (photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 2. Wrocław, dawne Siedlung Westend, widok współczesny, ul. Ślubicka (fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)

were built here, in 1842 – Świebodzki Station (Freiburger Bahnhof), and two years later Lower Silesian-Mark Station (Niederschlesisch-Märkischer Eisenbahnhof), which does not exist today. The railway contributed to the rapid industrialization and development of the industrial district – industry, including heavy industry (including the Linke-Hoffman-Werke plants, later Pafawag), became the driving force behind the large-scale spatial transformation of Przedmieście Mikołajskie. The development of industry resulted in the expansion of housing, mostly multi-story tenement houses for workers, which formed a compact housing of the quarters and gave the district a metropolitan character (Fig. 1). The population intensity of Przedmieście Mikołajskie grew steadily, but housing standards were not always high. Many workshops and small factories were created in the courtyards or next to the residential buildings. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century image of Szczepin was completed by neo-Gothic churches: the Catholic church of St. Nicholas (St. Nikolai Kirche) and the Lutheran church of St. Paul (Pauluskirche) with a characteristic double tower, as well as public buildings, mainly schools. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (in 1901), an electrified tram line was opened, running along today's Legnicka Street, which became a great convenience for the inhabitants.

The buildings in Szczepin were supplemented in the interwar period in accordance with the urban planning plans that were corrected at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modernist housing estate Siedlung Westend, designed by architect Theo Effenberger in collaboration with Heinrich Lauterbach<sup>5</sup>, was built on the western edge of the former village in 1924–1930. Built in the years 1924–1930 in the area of today's Ślubicka Street, fortunately it has been partially preserved to this day [16] (Fig. 2). The urban layout of the estate was adapted to the curved railway line running at the back of the complex. The architects correct-

ed the earlier checkered street layout, “softened” the plan of the estate giving it landscape features. At about the same time, in the years 1927–1928, in the adjacent quarter, the stylistically similar Viehreiche estate was built by the same architects, which, however, did not survive the war [16].

### Post-war reconstruction

Szczepin was an area particularly badly damaged during the three-month siege of Festung Breslau in 1945, when – along with the entire Przedmieście Mikołajskie – it turned into a sea of rubble. Only the network of streets survived as a testimony to the pre-war urban layout of the district. Of the densely built-up quarters of tenement houses, a few individual buildings remained, among others at the following streets: Legnicka, Rybacka or Stefana Czarnieckiego, as well as the frontage along Łęczycka Street (Fig. 3). Large school buildings survived the fights, including brick school buildings at Poznańska Street (now the District Court of Wrocław Fabryczna) and of the Młodych Techników Street. Several factory buildings and a bunker built during the war – an air-raid shelter for civilians at Strzegomski Square – have also been preserved<sup>6</sup>.

The post-war future of Szczepin was not clear at first<sup>7</sup>. Until the beginning of the 1960s, the district was mainly rubble and a background for the brick recovery operation. The large-scale demolition of damaged buildings, which

<sup>5</sup> Theodor (Theo) Effenberger (1882–1968), Heinrich Lauterbach (1893–1973) – German modernist architects born in Wrocław, working mainly in Wrocław, Silesia and Berlin (Effenberger); co-organizers of the WUWA exhibition in Wrocław (1929), for which they designed several single-family houses [15, pp. 965, 995].

<sup>6</sup> The air-raid shelter, built in 1942, with a characteristic round massive body, was designed by Richard Konwiarz (1883–1960) – a German architect, town planner, but also an official and academic teacher, associated with Breslau from 1909 until the end of World War II [15, p. 990]. Currently, the building is the temporary seat of the Contemporary Museum in Wrocław.

<sup>7</sup> The Szczepin area played an important role in the plans of the first Polish president of the city, Bolesław Drobner. In a document from the beginning of April 1945, that is, when the fighting for the city was still ongoing and he could not have known about the destruction of the district, he assumed that this is where the German inhabitants of Wrocław would be moved and located [1, p. 63]. President Drobner assumed that after the war and the takeover of the city by the Polish administration, the remaining German population would be resettled to the area designated as a classic ghetto.



Fig. 3. Wrocław, preserved pre-war tenement houses in S. Czarnieckiego Street with a residential infill added in the 1990s (photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 3. Wrocław, zachowane przedwojenne kamienice przy ul. S. Czarnieckiego z dobudowaną w latach 90. XX w. plombą mieszkalną (fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)



Il. 4. Wrocław, the rhythm of the Legnicka Street frontage in the Zachód II estate, which consists of 11-story residential blocks situated perpendicularly to it (photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 4. Wrocław, rytm pierzei ul. Legnickiej na osiedlu Zachód II, którą tworzą usytuowane prostopadle do niej 11-kondygnacyjne bloki mieszkalne (fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)

started in 1949, on the one hand cleared the city of rubble, but on the other hand led to the irretrievable destruction of buildings that could still be saved and rebuilt. Demolition was then subject to, among others the remains of the frontage and lines of tenement houses along Legnicka Street, on the section from Jana Pawła II Square to Strzegomski Square. By 1960, the Szczepin area was cleaned and prepared for development. However, for a long time no decision was made to start the construction of a new district of Wrocław. Legnicka Street has simply become an exit road from the city towards the west, running through undeveloped fields. The development plan for the years 1961–1965 adopted by the city authorities did not envisage any major construction projects in this part of the city. At that time, the reconstruction of the southern areas of Wrocław became a priority. In those years, the axis of Powstańców Śląskich Street was more important than the axis of Legnicka Street, which was in line with the general design guidelines for the entire city<sup>8</sup>.

However, it was impossible not to notice that the vast empty area of Szczepin was directly adjacent to the large industrial plants located in the area of Robotnicza Street. The aforementioned industrial facilities, as well as the constantly growing number of people<sup>9</sup>, led to the construction of the Wrocław-Zachód (Wrocław-West) housing estate “somewhat in the shadow” of projects carried out in the southern districts [7, p. 138]. In the first stage of construction of the new western Wrocław, the area lo-

cated in the immediate vicinity of the Old Town, on the west side of the then 1 Maja Square (now Jana Pawła II Square) was taken over. The concept of the estate was prepared in the years 1962–1963 by architects gathered at the Municipal Design Office in Wrocław (MBPW): Andrzej Łukaszewicz, Jerzy Jabłoński, Jerzy Szmorliński and Jerzy Wojnarowicz. Of course, there was no question of trying to recreate the pre-war character of the district. Tenement houses, compact quarters of urban buildings were replaced by free-standing prefabricated residential blocks. Along the initial, eastern section of Legnicka Street, repeating residential blocks in a comb layout were built until the end of the 1960s. Simple residential blocks, slightly architecturally diversified, in several height versions: 9- and 11-storey on the south side of Legnicka Street and 5- and 11-storey on its northern side, make up a clear, though schematic, urban composition of the Zachód I (West I) estate. A variation, which is worth noting, was the inclusion in the system of the few surviving pre-war tenement houses, which were kept from demolition in a relatively good technical condition. As a result, several residential blocks were added to the blind gable walls of the tenement houses. Of course, this did not restore full street frontages, but it slightly individualized and disrupted the schematic nature of the urban plan. The free spaces between the residential blocks are designated for greenery and recreational areas. Two one-story retail and service pavilions were also built, the architecture of which is distinguished by details. The first of them – a modular pavilion located on the south side of Legnicka Street with characteristic patios filled with greenery and covered with light openwork roofs, was designed by Andrzej Łukaszewicz. The second pavilion on the northern side of the street was erected in accordance with the design of Maria Molicka. It is distinguished by a compact body and a clearly horizontal layout of the façade.

<sup>8</sup> In 1957, the *General Spatial Development Plan for the years 1958–1980* was approved [17, p. 100]. It assumed the development of Wrocław mainly in the north-south direction, giving the development in the east-west axis a decidedly secondary importance.

<sup>9</sup> In the first post-war decade, the number of inhabitants of Wrocław doubled from nearly 171,000 in 1946 to nearly 380,000 in 1955. In the early 1970s, the population of Wrocław already exceeded half a million.

## Zachód II estate

Another complex of buildings erected within Szczepin was the Zachód II estate, which occupied an area enclosed between Legnicka and Długa Streets (along the longitudinal east-west axis) and Młodych Techników Street and the railway viaduct in the area of Zachodnia Street. The basis for the studies started in 1963 was the aforementioned *General Plan for Wrocław Spatial Development*, approved in 1957. Initially, several concepts for the estate were created by various authors, preliminary urban and architectural designs were developed at the Miejska Pracownia Urbanistyczna, Zakład Projektowania i Usług Inwestycyjnych “Inwestprojekt” (architect Jerzy Chelmiecki) and Miastoprojekt Wrocław (arch. Włodzimierz Czerechowski, Leszek Zdek). Ultimately, however, the estate project was put on the boards of the Miastoprojekt Wrocław office by the team whose main designer was the architect Witold Jerzy Molicki (1930–2013). For the then still young, and later one of the most famous builders of post-war Wrocław, the project of the Zachód II estate was the first such big and important professional challenge. The main co-author of the Szczepin development concept was Maria Molicka, privately the architect’s wife.

The project of the Zachód II estate was approved in 1966, and its implementation started two years later and lasted until the 1970s. As a result, a housing estate was built for nearly 25,000 residents, consisting of multi-family, mainly 5- and 11-storey residential blocks built in the technology of the so-called large plate (Fig. 4). Molicki realized in his project the idea of the so-called residential nests forming closed complexes of apartment block buildings. The basic element of such a nest are two types of buildings: double point buildings – two 11-story skyscrapers connected on the ground floor with a small service pavilion, and lower 5-story cages, the length of which is broken by a stepped segment arrangement. High-rise and low-rise buildings juxtaposed with each other create closed development quarters with internal courtyards, which have been designed as full of green places for recreation of residents and playgrounds for children (Figs. 5, 6) [12]. The skyscrapers were situated perpendicular to Legnicka Street (and Zachodnia Street), which was probably supposed to alleviate the nuisance of heavy car traffic on the main communication artery of western Wrocław<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, the low apartment blocks are mostly situated along the inner streets of the estate, often still paved, which to this day gives the interior of the complex a more intimate and resident-friendly character. The clear contrast between the monumental scale of the Zachód II estate viewed from Legnicka Street and the muted climate of internal, green courtyards is intriguing. Gabiś believes that: [...] *on such a scale, Molicki wanted to create the illusion of a series of defensive towers protecting the inner, lower buildings, and to give the street a modern, metropolitan expression, which*

*is particularly well visible from a distance* [7, p. 150]. It seems that the concept of the nests was also a deliberate contemporary interpretation of the historical, pre-war urban layout of Szczepin with quarters of tenement houses and street frontages. The green urban interiors of the Zachód II estate, surrounded on four sides by residential blocks that close the courtyards, can be considered a modern form of quarter development. The layout of the housing estate can also be seen as a continuation of the forms of housing which in Szczepin began with the pre-war Siedlung Westend [...] *with a structure of rationalised building blocks and green courtyards* [...] [16, p. 25]. It is impossible to deny Molicki’s vision and consistency in the implementation of the plan referring to the views, trends or even dogmas that were then in force in urban planning and architecture, with which the creators of the post-war world confronted the history and tradition of shaping urban space.

The creative inventiveness of architects in shaping both urban layouts and residential buildings was severely limited by the technology of the large panel. The residential blocks of the Zachód II estate are no exception – the forms of buildings, assessed as repetitive and schematic, fit into the canon of large panel aesthetics, which is still perceived as unattractive. Social reception and evaluation of the architectural legacy of the People’s Republic of Poland and the implementation of modernist ideas under the conditions of a socialist state, burdened with many stereotypes, are still superficial and harmful to the period and the architects and urban designers of the time. Post-war modernism in Poland is just beginning to be objectively analyzed, studied, appreciated, and finally protected. There is no doubt that this is a very necessary process, and its necessity is justified by the observation of contemporary trends in architecture, especially in urban planning, which are increasingly adversely changing urban space.

The designers of the Zachód II estate tried to break the monotony and schematic form of residential blocks made of large slabs – the juxtaposed point-shaped residential blocks were given simple, cuboidal solids with symmetrical elevations. The axis of the building was emphasized by the core with a staircase and the entrance accentuated by a roof, withdrawn in relation to the façade face. The horizontal layout of the façade was emphasized by the ribbon windows running along the entire length of the building. The divisions of the windows with characteristic loops and wallets in the outermost fields created an expressive, geometric composition. On the southern gable walls, the architect placed long balconies with full balustrades. Similar balconies were also found on selected floors, in the recesses of the staircase core. Thanks to this, the dominant verticalism of the communication core, which was additionally “disturbed” by the effects of chiaroscuro, has been mitigated. A certain visual diversification of the skyscrapers’ elevations was also the original colors designed by Witold Molicki, which consisted of alternating white and gray stripes and a few strong orange accents. The described composition of the elevation, skillful operation of both horizontal and vertical articulation, softened the monumental scale of the skyscrapers and at the same time gave them an individual character.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1980s, Legnicka Street was rebuilt. Along its entire length of several kilometers, it has become a dual carriageway (three lanes each) with a tramway track separated in the center.



Fig. 5. Wrocław, Kruszwicka Street, characteristic geometric layout of block buildings in the Zachód II estate – low 5-storey blocks and 11-storey high-rise buildings juxtaposed together perpendicularly (photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 5. Wrocław, ul. Kruszwicka, charakterystyczny geometryczny układ zabudowy blokowej na osiedlu Zachód II – zestawione ze sobą prostopadle niskie 5-kondygnacyjne bloki i 11-kondygnacyjne wieżowce (fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)



Fig. 6. Wrocław, the interior of the nest building housing estate Zachód II: the blocks surround an inner courtyard – a green square, a place for recreation and games for children (photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 6. Wrocław, wnętrze gniazdowej zabudowy osiedla Zachód II: bloki otaczają wewnętrzne podwórze – zielony skwer, miejsce rekreacji i zabaw dla dzieci (fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)

The nest residential block buildings were supplemented, without affecting the legibility of the urban layout, by low service facilities: commercial, schools, kindergartens, nurseries and clinics. The estate has also been skillfully integrated into the few remaining buildings from before World War II.

A little later, after 1970, three higher 16-storey apartment blocks were built between Zachodnia and Stefana Czarnieckiego Streets, which were also designed by Witold Molicki's team as the dominant feature of the Zachód II estate. The skyscrapers were supposed to be part of a larger shopping and service center, which, however, ultimately was not built. The completed buildings were in line with the main urban concept on which Molicki based the spatial plan of the eastern part of Szczepin, although

they were no longer in the type of nest buildings. They were placed perpendicularly to Zachodnia Street, in a parallel arrangement and slightly shifted in relation to each other. The architect repeated the principle of exposing the gable walls towards the street, which he applied to the doubled skyscrapers standing along Legnicka Street. Architecturally, [...] *skyscrapers are by far the most sculptural buildings designed by Molicki for the Zachód II estate. The faults of the external walls and the restless rhythm of rectangular balconies, originally emphasized by intense colors, are the elements that enliven the façades, introduce rich light and shade effects and give lightness to tall apartment blocks* [7, p. 150] (Fig. 7). The development in the eastern part of the estate was complemented by the monumental Church of Christ the King, which was



Fig. 7. Wrocław, the highest apartment blocks in Szczepin, 16-story skyscrapers in Zachodnia Street (photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 7. Wrocław, najwyższe bloki mieszkalne na Szczepinie, 16-kondygnacyjne wieżowce przy ul. Zachodniej (fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)

erected next to the skyscrapers at Zachodnia Street, on the plot between Młodych Techników and Inowrocławska Streets. The construction of the temple<sup>11</sup>, which was also designed by Witold Molicki, began in 1978 and was completed only in 1991. The church draws attention with its non-standard, dynamic shape – a polyhedron broken into four parts that have been shifted relative to each other. The architect joined the developing trend of postmodern architecture with this project. In his design, Molicki revealed a rich symbolism, the very shape of the church's body refers to the Old Testament tent, which symbolized the meeting with God (Fig. 8).

Among the non-residential buildings in Szczepin, it is certainly worth paying some attention to the building of the Dolnośląskie Centrum Diagnostyki Medycznej Dolmed at Legnicka Street. It is located on the southern side of the artery, so it does not belong to the area of the Zachód II estate, nevertheless, together with the skyscrapers

<sup>11</sup> Church of Christ the King stood on a plot of land near Św. Mikołaja Square, where the church of St. Nicholas as a parish church for Catholics. Heavily damaged, it was finally demolished after the war. Today, a cross stands in this place, and the square itself, as a result of later reconstruction, lost its original shape and became a square. The inhabitants of Szczepin did not have their own parish for 40 years.



Fig. 8. Wrocław, the monumental church of Christ the King in Młodych Techników Street (photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 8. Wrocław, monumentalny kościół pw. Chrystusa Króla przy ul. Młodych Techników (fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)

of the estate, it forms the “housing” of Legnicka Street (in the vicinity of Strzegomski Square) in its new post-war form<sup>12</sup>. Dolmed is considered one of the most important architectural achievements of Polish post-war modernism and is mentioned in all major studies devoted to this subject. The building was designed by architects Anna and Jerzy Tarnawski, and it was built in the years 1974–1977. The object is distinguished by the shape of a solid, reminiscent of an inverted pyramid, which grows out of the undercut ground floor. *The facility was to serve primarily healthy people, so the designers wanted to avoid associations with a hospital facility – hence not only the unusual shape, but also the careful finishing [...] [9, p. 24].* According to the design assumptions, Dolmed was to be a very modern medical facility, which is why it used the latest technical solutions and information technologies that were then new. Computers, an absolute novelty, were used to handle patients, process and store data on their health and research. Therefore, engineers from the pioneering Wrocław Electronic Works were involved in the design process. The architectural simplicity and clarity of form, proportions and elegance, as well as individually designed details, both façade and interior design (cooperation of outstanding artists, including Józef Chierowski, the author of the famous and now almost iconic *366 armchair*) make up the class of the building (Fig. 9).

In the 1980s and 1990s, during the political transformation, the conditions for the functioning of the construction industry changed, which coincided with the fascination of architects with the postmodern trend. The standardization and monotony of prefabricated housing estates is then abandoned in favor of more individualized architecture. In the Zachód II housing estate in Szczepin, vacant plots are being filled with buildings, but also the urban interiors designed by Witold Molicki are being densified. Among

<sup>12</sup> Dolmed was built in the place where the church of St. Paul, with extensive parish buildings and in the immediate vicinity of the preserved air-raid shelter from 1942, currently the seat of the Contemporary Museum.



Fig. 9. Wrocław, Dolmed  
– an icon of Polish People’s Republic modernism,  
view from Strzegomska Street (photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 9. Wrocław, Dolmed – ikona modernizmu PRL-u,  
widok od ul. Strzegomskiej  
(fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)



Fig. 10. Wrocław, the new investment “Legnicka 33”  
at Strzegomski Square  
(photo by A. Sobolewski, 2022)

Il. 10. Wrocław, nowa inwestycja „Legnicka 33”  
przy pl. Strzegomskim  
(fot. A. Sobolewski, 2022)

other things, a residential and commercial complex of varying scales and heights was built on Zachodnia Street as a continuation of the development of the southern frontage of this street, which began with the aforementioned 16-storey skyscrapers and the church designed by Molicki. More single, mostly taller, detached buildings or added to existing houses (e.g., apartment blocks at Stefana Czarnieckiego and Kruszwicka Streets) have appeared on the estate. Despite these interventions and additions, the original urban layout of the Zachód II estate with the characteristic way of shaping the interiors of the estate and a well-thought-out, geometric composition of perpendicular apartment blocks remains legible. Undoubtedly, it is of great value as an outstanding example and a testimony to an era that influenced the shaping of Wrocław’s urban spaces so strongly. It is worth recalling that in 1972 Witold Molicki received the award of the Minister of Construction and the Minister of Local Economy and Environmental Protection for the design of the Zachód II estate.

Currently, the Zachód II housing estate, like the whole of Szczepin, is perceived as a very attractive place to live. Great location, proximity to the centre, good transport connections, availability of services, green and recreational areas – all these factors attract new residents. Although, as Gronostajska points out in her monograph on shaping the living environment for the elderly [13, pp. 129–143], Szczepin as a typical large-panel housing estate with almost 50 years of history and nearly half of its residents classified as seniors requires urgent transformations, that will adapt it to the requirements of the present day. The age of the estate is not only associated with the technical wear and tear of the buildings and infrastructure. The estate was designed and realised in a different reality, in which many aspects obligatory in today’s thinking about a people-friendly city did not exist or had a different dimension. Such an element is undoubtedly the car as the primary form of individual transport, which has taken over urban space. But it is also the accessibility of the city

for the elderly, for people with disabilities. Eliminating architectural barriers is certainly a big challenge, not only in Szczepin, of course.

The attractiveness of the area translates into new investments. Unfortunately, the latest one, which was built in Szczepin, is an example of degradation of the existing spatial arrangement and disregard for the context and specificity of the place. A large apartment building has been erected on a highly exposed plot at Strzegomski Square, at the intersection of Legnicka and Poznańska streets<sup>13</sup>. The apartmenthouse is a term, which has been very much used recently in Poland, for a residential block, rarely adequate to the quality of flats and architecture. The building has aggressively filled the empty corner, probably very valuable from the point of view of the development economy, but in no way relates to the existing neighborhood. The manner the house is located in relation to the street disturbs the rhythm of the urban composition of the Zachód II housing estate, which defined the character of the frontage of Legnicka Street. In his design, Molicki did not use the frontage estate, which would recreate a pre-war compact quarter development with tenement houses lined up along the streets. The new residential block “pretends” to be such a frontage (which is additionally emphasized by the service ground floor) on a very short section of Legnicka Street, which looks artificial and strange in the existing surroundings (Fig. 10). Without further reflection, the designers also resolved the direct contact between the eastern wing of the said building (from the side of Poznańska Street) and the existing buildings of the former school. The brick building that stands out in its surroundings, one of the few in Szczepin, which survived the siege of Festung Breslau and became the seat of the court after modernization, was overwhelmed by the scale of its new

<sup>13</sup> The investor is Vantage Development, the designer – architect Maciej Kowaluk

neighbor. The lack of dialogue between the present and history is not justified by the quality of the architecture of the apartment building itself, which has been provided with repetitive façades, typical of residential houses under construction. A mosaic of several fashionable solutions – façade “templates”, which were probably intended by the designers to divide the optically long façade on the side of Legnicka Street and soften its huge scale, is not enough to create a new, aesthetic dominant of Strzegomski Square. And only such action could possibly explain the complete lack of respect and understanding for the work of previous generations of architects.

### Summary

Archival photos, films and other source materials show the beauty of pre-war Breslau, the capital of Lower Silesia, a metropolis with a rich, centuries-long history, but also with bold visions of future development. It is undoubtedly regrettable that this Wrocław did not survive the war drama and began its new historical chapter in 1945 as a city in ruins. A city that had to be not only rebuilt, but in large part built from scratch. Faithful to the historical original, reconstructions and reconstructions were possible only in a small part of the devastated areas, thanks to which the architects received a huge testing ground for the implementation of modern urban and architectural ideas, responding to the needs of rapidly changing societies. Almost all of southern and western Wrocław was built from scratch. The new districts changed the urban landscape as their urban composition differed significantly from historical rules and principles. Time constantly verifies the achievements of that time. Discussions and assessments of the architectural achievements in Poland of the communist era are still ongoing. Filip Springer, in the title of one of his “architectural” reportages, called the objects of this era symptomatically ill-born [18]. Jakub Lewicki, historian of architecture and conservator of monuments noted in one of the interviews: *The stigma of the People’s Republic of Poland is a very important element, but most*

*of these buildings are extremely neglected and degraded, their condition is deteriorating and most often deprived of any care. Hence, buildings that were beautiful, functional and useful, today are dirty, neglected hovels. [...] I wish that everyone would look at 20<sup>th</sup>-century objects more sympathetically. He did not immediately dismiss them as nasty blocks, but tried to understand the intentions of their creators and tried to imagine them not neglected, not dirty, but still clean, effective and useful [19].*

The analysis of the Zachód II estate proves that it is a very interesting experiment and a testimony of its time, and at the same time it is a value that should be protected. *A great challenge in the modernization of post-war architecture is maintaining, firstly, respect for the original idea, and secondly, the greatest possible degree of the original substance – while meeting the requirements of the construction industry and the investor’s expectations [20, p. 204].* Many elements that make up the original expression of the estate have not survived. First of all, the original “strip” colors of the residential blocks’ elevations have not been preserved. Like most large-panel buildings, they are successively insulated, which is an understandable and most economically justified process. The new colors on the insulated façades do not, however, try to refer to the Molicki project in any way. Window joinery, replaced by the tenants themselves, does not reproduce the original rhythm of divisions with characteristic vent windows. The recently rebuilt balconies in apartment blocks receive balustrades in a form and material that is foreign to the prototypes. The list of threats goes on. It was discussed earlier about increasing the density of buildings that changed the composition of the estate. Therefore, the prospects for the urban and architectural protection of the Zachód II estate are not very optimistic. It is a pity, because the experiences of other countries, but also fortunately emerging Polish examples, prove that the cultural heritage of post-war modernism is beginning to be perceived as a great value.

Translated by  
Jan Urbanik

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### Abstract

#### *Zachód II housing estate in Szczepin in Wrocław – a place built anew*

The Zachód II housing estate in Wrocław's Szczepin is an example of new development created on the ruins of the former city, destroyed during World War II. Realisation of modernist urban concepts, which broke with historical patterns of shaping the urban structure on the basis of quarter and frontage buildings, completely changed the character of the western part of Wrocław. The article presents the housing estate Zachód II, built in the 1960s according to the project of the team of architects led by Witold Molicki. The new buildings are presented against a background of the historical development of Szczepin until 1939 as well as in the context of conditions of the post-war reconstruction. A contemporary assessment of the settlement must take these conditions into account, because architecture has never been created in isolation from socio-economic reality. The aim of the article is not only to present the urban and architectural masterpieces of post-war modernism, but also to draw attention to the need to protect the cultural heritage and construction of the communist period in Poland. Threats arise not only from the technical wear and tear of buildings, functional changes, etc., but also from the need to educate the public about them and to protect them. It also seems necessary to educate people and change people's awareness in order to recognise the qualities and specificity of this architecture and to develop concepts for its modernisation and revitalisation, while preserving the most important original ideas of its authors.

**Key words:** Wrocław, Szczepin, housing estate, large-panel construction, modernism in the architecture of PRL

### Streszczenie

#### *Osiedle Zachód II na wrocławskim Szczepinie – miejsce zbudowane na nowo*

Osiedle Zachód II na wrocławskim Szczepinie jest interesującym przykładem nowej zabudowy powstałej na gruzach dawnego miasta, zniszczonego podczas II wojny światowej. Realizacja modernistycznych założeń urbanistycznych, które zrywały z historycznymi wzorcami kształtowania tkanki miejskiej w oparciu o kwartałową i pierzejową zabudowę, całkowicie zmieniła charakter zachodniej części Wrocławia. W artykule przedstawiono osiedle Zachód II w kontekście rozwoju Szczepina do lat 40. XX w. oraz uwarunkowań powojennej odbudowy. Współczesna ocena osiedla musi te uwarunkowania uwzględniać, architektura nigdy nie powstawała w oderwaniu od rzeczywistości społeczno-ekonomicznej. Celem artykułu jest nie tylko prezentacja wartościowego dzieła urbanistycznego i architektonicznego, ale również zwrócenie uwagi na potrzebę ochrony w Polsce kulturowego dziedzictwa i budownictwa okresu PRL-u. Zagrożenia wynikają nie tylko z technicznego zużycia budynków, zmian funkcjonalnych itp. Konieczna wydaje się również edukacja i zmiana świadomości ludzi, które pozwolą dostrzec walory i specyfikę tej architektury oraz wypracować koncepcje modernizacji, rewitalizacji, przy jednoczesnym zachowaniu najważniejszych założeń autorskich jej twórców.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Wrocław, Szczepin, osiedle mieszkaniowe, wielka płyta, modernizm w architekturze PRL-u