



Warsaw Housing Co-operative: City in Action. By Magdalena Matysek-Imielińska (Trans. Monika Fryszkowska)

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Warsaw Housing Co-operative: City in Action

By Magdalena Matysek-Imielińska (Trans. Monika Fryszkowska).
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I was looking forward to reading this book and I was not disappointed. I will probably go back and have a more leisurely read at some point in the future. It is packed with historical information as well as contemporary theory and practice and a wealth of source materials – there are some good photographs too both of the built environment and some of the residents of the housing co-operative. While Magdalena Matysek-Imielińska provides her analysis and opinion on whether Żoliborz and the Warsaw Housing Co-operative (WHC) are cast as an urban experiment in citizenship (p. 119), laboratory (a la May, p. 41, also chapter 7), project, workshop (after Sennet — chapter 7), there is enough detail provided that allows the reader to contemplate and come to their own conclusions. Neither does she stint on contextual and background information on the political and economic context that was the backdrop not only to the developing co-operative movement in Poland but also to the establishment and life of the housing co-operative (1926 to just after WWII). While the book is part of critical urban studies, the author includes an insight into the structure and organising in and behind WHC and the diversity of the founders and key players (Matysek-Imielińska refers to them as “Miessenain critical spatial practitioners” (p. 120; see also p. 1) — including Stanislaw Ossowski (tenant, researcher, and social reformer); the socially- and community-minded architects (Barbara Brukalska), working-class and intelligentsia, and socialist and communist workers party members (p. 26).

This English translation is an extended and revised version of *City in Action. The Warsaw Housing Co-operative — a common good in modern times* and, as the title suggests provides an historical overview of the housing co-operative in the context of the idea of the city. Rather than a focus on cities as commodified spaces and neoliberal forms of urbanisation (Brenner et al., 2009), Matysek-Imielińska points to the reclaiming of urban spaces as a ‘political idea’ that creates community spaces and neighbourhood relations (p. 4). Looking back at the history of the Żoliborz housing estate and the creation of Warsaw Housing Co-operative (Warszawska Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa or Żoliborz republic), Matysek-Imielińska helps to “restore (remember) a kind of awareness about the possibilities to exercise the right to the city” of “practised co-operation” (p. 5). For many experiencing lockdown restrictions in the UK and elsewhere, the words of the co-operative’s 1930s manifesto still hold resonance in claiming green spaces as one of the basic common goods: “We told ourselves: gardens and green spaces must no longer be a privilege” (Próchnik, 1934, cited on p. 11).

Chapter 2 covers the influence of Fourier in Russia and Owen in Scotland and the United States in their underpinning philosophies and designs for utopian housing estates and tenant co-operatives, and the fits and starts of the co-operative movement in a partitioned Poland. With independence, after the first world war, support for co-operatives and their development increased more rapidly and Matysek-Imielińska describes how in 1922 as well as a thriving consumer co-operative sector, there were 18 construction co-operatives and 72 housing co-operatives which grew to over 850 mainly small tenants’ co-operatives by 1930 (p. 25). It was in this context that WHC was established, which by 1937 had grown to include over 2,000

members, despite a split in the movement particularly in relation to political neutrality and ideological differences and Matysek-Imielińska provides an interesting and detailed account of the political, social, and economic conditions in the pre- and inter-war years, the Sanacja regime up to and including the German invasion of Poland and occupation of Warsaw.

In chapter 3, the Matysek-Imielińska turns to trends and movements in construction and architecture. Again, a chapter packed with historical and critical review and appreciation of the different narratives that add to the complexity of the international development of social housing: its purpose and function, whose needs are being prioritised and/or met, the problems of design over community. She introduces us to the founding members of the co-operative and, in the following chapter, the influence of Barbara Brukalska, whom Matysek-Imielińska describes as a now mostly forgotten, socially engaged architect. Brukalska was against company-sponsored dwellings which she perceived as creating an unhealthy dependency in tying individuals to their workplace favouring, instead, co-operative housing which would enable mutual help as well as autonomy in that tenants could if need be, change their jobs without losing their accommodation. There is an interesting discussion here also in relation to design taking account of the “rhythm of workers’ lives” (p. 63) and architecture as shaping habits and behaviours. WHC had its own magazine that contained amongst other things advice on community living and the business of the co-operative including any residents’ misdemeanours and the accompanying punishments, and prizes for best kept garden, thereby reinforcing expected norms and standards of behaviour. At the same time, it also promoted workers’ and women’s liberation (through the formation of the Active Cooperatists’ Club), and the needs and development of children. Section 4.3 pp. 74-91, outlines the ‘kitchen struggle’ — the inclusion of an open-plan kitchen in the design, initially depicted as a resource for the city-dwelling working woman and a shift away from the provision of a room for a domestic servant. Later the design was such that by having the kitchen as a separate room it meant some of the tenants (members of the intelligentsia) would use this space as servants’ quarters, and later designs gave way to the provision of decent accommodation for live-in domestic workers.

Attention was also given to the WHC community as part of the city (a city within the city). Rather than being isolated and separate (rather like some of today’s gated communities), there were a number of public buildings including a swimming pool, library, and concert/conference hall. And, according to Matysek-Imielińska the provision of “co-operative trade, gardening and plant cultivation as well as cafeteria and health care, developed at the co-operative estate level, became not only co-operative, self-help economic institutions, but above all, ideologised anti-capitalist strategies”. Yet on the one hand, while “co-operative thinkers provided a broad theoretical reflection ... skilfully combining cooperativism with socialism” on the other hand, “activists and reformers ... trying to improve the functioning of the co-operative, taught residents rational shopping and saving habits” (p. 135) to keep finances under control and avoid living on credit (p. 149). Women involved as active co-operatists set up systems and resources such as home delivery services, household appliance rental, a co-operative laundry, a small hotel providing temporary accommodation and skills training for homeless women, a work agency, and established a savings and loans mutual assistance bank (p. 150). There was even a school garden and petting zoo for the children. All of which were supervised by the WHC management. It was the interdependency, connectivity and embeddedness of these institutions (and individuals) which Matysek-Imielińska believes helped Żoliborz and the WHC avoid elitism if not ideological skirmishes and schisms:

Self-management and at the same time self-awareness of the order of norms and permanent ideological framework were possible mainly due to the continuous processes of reminding, quoting, repeating, discussing and ‘celebrating’ it. These tactics of self-awareness made the adopted behaviours and conventions be constantly refreshed and negotiated, thanks to which they became neither a natural nor a common *modus operandi*. (p.171, italics in the original).

Constant processes of reminding, quoting, repeating, discussing, and celebrating can, of course, be seen as part of a conditioning compliance mode of socialisation but they can also be part of creating a community of interest and collective social identity. The descriptions provided

by Matysek-Imielińska bounce between formal and deterministic with top-down rules and regulations instilling modes of behaviour, and more organic, informal, and negotiated practices. This also influenced the place and education of children, which was based on John Dewey's (1916/2015) conception of education as emancipatory and experiential and included Montessori approaches to teaching (p. 236).

Chapter 10 deals in more detail with the occupation of Warsaw which did not stop WHC activists from continuing their construction, education and other (unofficial) community activities, including support for, amongst other things, an underground paper, *Poland is still Alive!* published by the Komenda Obrońców Polski (KOP) — the Polish Defenders Command. WHC — an oasis for many during this time (p. 270), eventually became a state-controlled enterprise. In 1942, it was compulsorily put under German administration, by 1944 the buildings of the first WHC Colony had been destroyed and those of the 7th Colony burnt down (p. 273).

The WHC project may have been deemed a failure by some, elitist by others, but despite its shortfalls and its less-than-ideal practice in some instances as Matysek-Imielińska concludes:

... after nearly a hundred years of Warsaw Housing Cooperative's existence, we continue to discuss the achievements of the Żoliborz activists. And this book proves this point. They did not build much — it is true. But they tested city-forming strategies, developed urban self-management, initiated civic and neighbourhood housing practice and also proved that on the periphery of the capitalist system, you can build autonomous zones, which are not escapist survival strategies or remote enclaves, but civic self-organised communities (pp. 272-3).

While it may be true, as Matysek-Imielińska claims, that “historians of Polish socialism and the co-operative movement will not find much inspiration here”, from my own perspective I beg to differ.

The Reviewer

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