

Super Vision

In the past, cultural relations between Germany and Poland largely took place between the cultural centres of Berlin and Warsaw. Outside of these metropolitan areas, however, the majority of Germans and Poles know very little about the cultural activities in their neighbouring country. The project *Büro Kopernikus* promotes ties to and cooperative ventures with artists and institutions in less culturally prominent cities. For example, between the two industrial cities Wolfsburg and Nowa Huta, both of which have similar histories, yet today, are vastly dissimilar in their public perception. In the following, Stefanie Peter, the artistic director of *Büro Kopernikus*, describes her impressions of a trip she took together with a Polish curator to Wolfsburg.

by Stefanie Peter

Green meadows have always sparked the imagination of urban planners. With every open plot, they feel the urge to create something new – from the ground up. The blank slate begs for a systematic grand-scale design and encourages one to experiment with buildings and people. Where there was once emptiness, utopias should take shape. The planners of Wolfsburg were obviously infected by such ideas when the city was founded, as anyone driving toward the city can guess. Out of nowhere, four towers suddenly rise above the horizon. Although abandoned long ago, the smokestacks of the Volkswagen factory are still the city's trademark. At the start of the Christmas season, VW goes all out and installs lights at the tops of smokestacks. One after another, they are illuminated like candles on an Advent wreath. Yet whose advent is this industrial city anticipating? Perhaps the hope of salvation from a future technological wonder.

The young man who I've accompanied to Wolfsburg is a curator from Krakow. Like most Polish cultural artists of his generation, he is only familiar with one German city – Berlin. He knows that city like the back of his hand. His English is fluent and he has close contacts to Berlin's musicians and artists. Our guest's view is as fixated on Berlin as Germans are focused on Warsaw; very few are aware of the Polish cultural activities which are firmly established in less populated areas outside of Warsaw. It's high time that we become more acquainted with its vibrant cultural scene.

We set out to Wolfsburg in late summer. When we arrive, our passenger only needs to glance at the factory parking lots filled with hundreds of VWs lined up row after row. They sparkle in the sunshine. "Stunning colours, perfect light – just like in that communist propaganda film about our Fiat Polski," our Polish friend remarks. We've got an appointment

with the new director of the Wolfsburg Art Association.

Wolfsburg is located between the Harz Mountains and the Lüneburg Heath, and at one time, it skirted the Iron Curtain. Historically speaking, Wolfsburg has something in common with Nowa Huta – both were planned cities. In 1938, the National Socialists founded Wolfsburg as the “KdF Car City”¹. Designed by the architect Peter Koller, the city was conceived as an industrial site, most of whose inhabitants would work at the automobile factory. However, instead of VW Beetles, the employees spent the war years producing vitally important war materials such as military jeeps and parts for the V1 rockets. Only after it fell to British Allied control did the city receive its present name. If we regard Wolfsburg as a model city borne of National Socialism, then Nowa Huta with its steel plant can certainly be considered a model city of communism. Historically, however, the fates of these two cities parted company long ago. While Wolfsburg with VW has become a symbol of economic prosperity since the war, the grand design of Nowa Huta has fallen into dilapidation and ruin. The end of this Polish workers’ city came with the collapse of its heavy industry in 1989, if not earlier. Our guest from Krakow has come to Wolfsburg to compare it to Nowa Huta, but now it’s obvious he had imagined the Wolfsburg much differently. “In Poland, when you think of industry, you think of grey,” he says, “Fog, rust and rain falling on broken machines. Drip, drip, drip, that’s the sound of tears cried by laid-off dockhands, steel workers, miners. When we talk about industrial cities like Nowa Huta, we usually mean the post-industrial areas. Areas which have already been ‘restructured’. Where we live, the big factories are closed or are in the process of closing, and most of the time there’s no end to the problems caused by the ‘harsh demands of the market’”. Although Wolfsburg’s skyline is full of smokestacks and factory halls, they are neatly arranged and easy on the eye.

On the way to the castle where the art association has set up its stately headquarters, our host offers to take us on a small driving tour of the city via Wolfsburg’s three-lane expressways. “Everybody drives a Volkswagen here”, our Polish visitor notices. “In Poland, before 1989, we also had just one car company and two models to choose from – a big Fiat and a small Fiat.” We peer into a pedestrian zone – we see an “Oktoberfest” which gives the impression of bustling community activity in a normal city. Yet, at the same time, there’s something strangely artificial about the event. Just like the buildings on our route which look more like they belong to a theme park featuring the architectural avant-garde of the 20th and 21st centuries. The cultural centre was built by the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, the city hall was designed by Hans Scharoun, a new “Science Center” is under construction near the train station, designed by the Iranian architect Zaha Hadid. One can tell that Wolfsburg doesn’t have a very long urban history. The city seems somewhat artificial, as if it were fresh

from the drawing board.

Obviously Wolfsburg thinks something of itself. Also in Nowa Huta, our guest tells me, people remember a time when it was the proud child of what has become a detested system. It

1 *KdF: Kraft durch Freude* was a National Socialistic slogan meaning “Strength Through Joy”. It prided itself on the steel it produced for the benefit of Poland, much like the Wolfsburgs are still proud of their cars today.

Thanks to VW and the money it pumps into the city, a large collection of important architectural and cultural productions have found a home in Wolfsburg. Such development projects no longer take place in Nowa Huta. Our visitor tells us that “the ‘Centre for the Struggle for a Better Future for Workers’ is now a junkyard on the outskirts of town for our scrapped machines of hope.” Wolfsburg is probably as proud of its productivity today as Nowa Huta was in the sixties and seventies. Back then Nowa Huta was officially known as the city without traffic jams, a perfectly planned, green idyll, peopled by happy workers, full of parks, lakes and fishing clubs.

The steel-working city was built just outside of Krakow in the 1950s, designed in the style of socialistic realism. It was a prominent symbol of the creation of Polish socialism. As the birthplace of *Solidarnosc*, Nowa Huta’s significance remained strong well into the 1980s. Now its importance has been reduced to nothing more than a curiosity and research object. The recent artistic and historic interest, which foreigners and Poles have increasingly shown in the city, also has a history. The great Ryszard Kapuscinski became, so to speak, a political writer in Nowa Huta. Because of his investigative reporting on inhumane working conditions, the young writer incurred the Party’s wrath and sanctions in 1955. Andrzej Wajda’s film “Man of Marble” – a milestone in European filmmaking history – is set in Nowa Huta and depicts the tragic fates of those “heroes of labour” which Stalinist sculptures raised to monumental heights only to be dropped again by history.

For those who visit Nowa Huta today, they discover a place of refuge from the polished urban sheen of Krakow’s tourism industry. Free space abounds in Nowa Huta which seems to beg for artistic exploitation. At the same time, everywhere you look, Polish history is present, enabling young artists to find an anchor in their country’s past.

While Nowa Huta is dying the same way its steel plant has, it appears that the car industry continues to promise Wolfsburg a bright future. Perhaps, as our Polish guest remarks, Wolfsburg’s future is basically determined by its combination of production and consumption. Volkswagen’s old factory smokestacks are now dwarfed by the glass towers of its Autostadt, a company-owned marketing park. Inside those towers, one can find the newest car models, while at the train station, friendly ladies from the Autostadt visitors’ centre greet disembarking

customers. Perhaps, our guest speculates, Wolfsburg is truly the utopia of a planned city in the post-industrial era. Or, more soberly put, Nowa Huta is the future which could still befall Wolfsburg. These are questions which do not only concern economic experts. Places like these also require artistic perspicacity and a careful eye for aesthetics which takes the historic development of these cities into account. Wolfsburg and Nowa Huta are integral for the culture of both countries. The history of these planned cities mirror the history of both Germany and Poland. Beyond their important cultural centres, cities like these demonstrate social utopias in their making and in their failing.

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