

Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

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False walls and double attics: fortifying Warsaw's inner city

During World War Two, Warsaw's much-maligned tenements and infrastructure were reconceived by the Resistance to function as a bulwark against the Nazi occupation. Concealed meeting locations, storage facilities, manufacturing spaces, and underground shelters and passageways were constructed, veiled from the Nazis for civilian protection and underground military activities. Pre-war, the most widely criticized aspects of the inner city, its narrow streets, high building density, and poor quality wooden construction proved to be most suitable for both passive and active forms of resistance.

According to one account, the Home Army commissioned at least 50 apartment renovations, the purpose of which was to convert living quarters into concealed meeting locations. Ideal to this purpose were top floor apartments in buildings of wooden construction, where access to rooftops and multiple escape routes could be easily and quickly constructed. Common was the practice of linking adjacent buildings via attics or basements to create concealed passageways. Ground floor spaces were preferred for storage, printing presses and manufacturing facilities. In 1943 there were reportedly over 400 underground shelters built within the Warsaw Ghetto, dug below the buildings as well as their inner courtyards/light wells, their holding capacity ranged from a few individuals up to several hundred. Some of the shelters were makeshift expansions of preexisting basements while others were new sophisticated construction projects comprised of multiple rooms fitted with electricity, telephone, plumbing, airshafts, and alternative exits. The narrowness of the streets allowed for at least four underground tunnels to be dug, linking the Ghetto with the Polish side.

The discussion of architectural activity in wartime Warsaw is commonly limited to the work carried out in preparation for the postwar reconstruction and documentation of historic monuments under threat of destruction. The actual building activity taking place in the city continues to be largely under-investigated by architectural historians, discussed more frequently by historians in the contexts of Jewish and Polish resistance movement. Among those involved in the forms of wartime building activity described above were trained architects, engineers, and professional builders. The purpose of this paper is to expand the discussion of wartime architectural activity in Warsaw to encompass these forms of architectural and building production and to show that wartime conditions, and a repressive occupation, revealed an unexpected value to the dense urban fabric, which in peacetime circumstances was dismissed and identified for demolition.

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