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### MDM

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## Book, exhibition and film reviews

### *MDM*

Canada/Poland, 2005 – 37 minutes  
Produced and directed by Eric Bednarski  
Editor: Iván M. Carmona  
Camera, Sound, Lights: Jerzy Rudzinski  
Music Composed by Rodrigo Caballero  
Szadek Productions  
www.szadek.com

For the casual tourist in Warsaw, the overbearing buildings and towering socialist realist statues of the 1950s' MDM complex (Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkalniowa—Marszałkowska Housing District) are likely to appear as an odd, even charming, anachronism in a city whose rapid economic transition is clearly marked in its opulent shopfronts and advertisement-laden streetscapes. For Bednarski, a young Canadian documentary filmmaker, the structures of the MDM have a deeper meaning: they are a reflection of Warsaw's, and Poland's, troubled twentieth-century history of destruction, loss, disappointment, and eventual rebirth. Aply interweaving archival footage, interviews, city plans and contemporary street scenes, his film *MDM* sets out a compelling tale of architectural transformation in one of Warsaw's central neighbourhoods.

Bednarski tells the story of one of the Polish communist regime's largest urban planning projects, a story with which few non-Polish viewers are likely to be familiar. While much has been written about the regime's totalitarian stranglehold on civil society, pervasive corruption, prolific propaganda machine and frequent use of intimidation and

violence for social control, much less attention has been paid to the way in which the communists attempted to shape urban space to ideological ends. Bednarski's film successfully fills this lacuna.

*MDM* traces the development of the massive residential complex, erected in the heart of Warsaw after the Second World War, during which more than eighty-five percent of the city had been destroyed by the Nazis. In announcing the project, the communist regime sought to win favour with Varsovians, who were eager to rebuild their shattered city, whilst also reinforcing the key ideological tenets of the newly established political system: the triumph of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, the virtues of central planning and the cultural superiority of the Soviet Bloc over the West. The deeply propagandist aims of the authorities are illustrated poignantly in the film with audio excerpts from a speech by Warsaw's post-war Mayor who extols MDM's promise to 'form the new socialist centre of [the] capital' where once stood 'ugly flats built according to depraved bourgeois tastes' and where 'the bourgeois bosses strutted and the capitalist exploiters had their feeding grounds.' The new district was to be beautiful, expansive and inhabited by an ostensible cross-section of the country's population, which in practice meant workers and a handful of intellectuals who were friendly to the State (as evidenced by archival images of residents' rosters that list labourers, lathe-operators, carpenters and a single artist).

Despite the fanfare that accompanied the development's opening in 1952, and the subsequent state-sponsored public relations campaign featuring

MDM-themed songs, poems and even cigarettes, the project turned out to be a fiasco. The colossal costs of constructing residences for 45,000 people with high-quality materials proved to be too much for the government to bear, as we are told by historians interviewed in the film. At the time of its unveiling, only fifteen percent of the complex had been completed. We learn from a former resident of the neighbourhood that the politically correct cross-section of society that was supposed to inhabit the new buildings consisted of only about 400 families, which made the project more reminiscent of a Potemkin Village than a radically redesigned urban space. Furthermore, the layout of the district's streets, which had been intentionally reconfigured to obfuscate the view of the Church of the Saviour, proved to be problematic from both an architectural and city planning point of view. The modified plans eradicated the long, spanning vista that would have culminated in a spectacular historical building, and in doing so, severely disrupted the flow of traffic through the artery. As Warsaw's former chief city planner remarks, the resulting Constitution Square was designed with 'no proper way out of it'.

The story of the district's planning, execution and ultimate failure is fascinating in its own right, but what makes *MDM* an especially powerful film is the sense of personal and collective loss that is subtly incorporated into the narrative. For Bednarski, the MDM was not just an ill-conceived example of communist propaganda, it was also an act of profound injustice. As we are told by Bednarski's father, himself an architect and a former resident of the neighbourhood cleared for the building of the MDM, owners of pre-war flats were initially led to

believe that they would be housed in the new development. Many welcomed the prospect of having their living conditions improved. Unfortunately the reality proved to be far less sanguine as the government expropriated the existing residences and relocated their occupants to small flats scattered throughout the city. The destruction of the old tenements, including many prime examples of Polish Art Nouveau style, is depicted in the film not only as a loss to property owners, but also an act of symbolic violence in a city already badly scarred by the war.

Ultimately, the story of the MDM is one of historical transformation. During the film's thirty-seven minutes, we are led on an historical tour that begins with remarkable archival photographs of a war-ravaged Warsaw, followed by street scenes from the post-war reconstruction, architectural plans for the MDM, and images of the celebrations organised for the project's opening in 1952. A musical score of songs from the 1940s and 1950s, many of which were written under contract for the communist authorities, firmly root us in Stalinist Poland. As the film progresses, the setting shifts briefly to the years following Stalin's death in 1953, when the MDM's socialist realism on a grand scale lost favour among the communist elites which sought to move the party in a more modern direction.

We are shown archival photographs of the new housing projects that began to appear throughout the city's suburbs, in which the stylised Ionic columns, ornate entablatures and gigantic statues of muscular workers characteristic of socialist realism gave way to block-shaped high-rise buildings devoid of architectural imagination. From there, Bednarski finally transports us to the Warsaw of the early

2000s. We see that the once-stern walls of the MDM are now adorned with bright corporate logos and advertising, and the once-portentous socialist realist space of Constitution Square is teeming with commercial activity as pedestrians mill around colourful market stalls with shopping bags in hand.

The depiction of the MDM's journey—from potent political symbol in the 1950s to rejuvenated commercial centre in the newly market-oriented Polish society—says as much about the history of communism in Poland as it does about the MDM itself. The communist government's rhetoric, its lofty and ultimately empty promises of social justice and economic prosperity, its ideological battle with the Catholic Church and its persistent attempts to pave over Polish history, both figuratively and literally, are all too familiar to anyone who lived in the country prior to 1989. The film's ability to evoke all these salient features of the communist era without straying from its central topic is remarkable. But *MDM* does more than simply reconstruct the past with carefully chosen archival materials and revealing interviews; it also raises important questions about how Poles today ought to deal with their complicated history.

In the film's final minutes, we are told by an urban historian that the MDM recently gained the status of an historical heritage site, a development rich in irony given the film's portrayal of a project whose construction resulted in irreparable damage to Warsaw's cultural heritage. The decision legally to protect the MDM suggests that the district evokes a certain degree of nostalgia among many Varsovians, even if it simultaneously serves as a reminder of a dark period in their country's history. Indeed, the tension between the celebration and outright rejection of a

painful past is perhaps one of the central predicaments of Polish, and more generally post-communist, social memory. How should Poles incorporate the forty-four years of communist rule into their individual and public consciousness? Did Poland as a nation-state effectively cease to exist between 1939 and 1989, as some have sought to argue? And what should Poles do with the products of that time period, whether they be cultural, political and/or material? These are some of the central questions with which Bednarski leaves us at the end of his powerful film. To his credit, he chooses not to provide simple answers, for none really exist. The future of the MDM rests in the hands of the Varsovians who occupy the space today, much as does the future of their collective memory of the communist years.

Bednarski's film should be of great interest to a diverse audience. It is not surprising that in the four years since its release, *MDM* has been screened at over a dozen festivals and conferences in Canada, the USA, Poland and New Zealand, and has won an award for best documentary at the Georgetown Film Festival. We should expect great things from this young filmmaker, whose other projects document the harrowing experiences of a family member who spent six months in a Nazi concentration camp (*Postcards from Auschwitz*, 2004) and the remarkable story of a lone dissenter from the Manhattan Project who subsequently founded the Pugwash Conference (*The Strangest Dream*, 2009).

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