

In Bleak Europe, a Thriving Poland

The past gives Poles a shudder. The future is on view in the economic and cultural vibrancy of Warsaw.

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Warsaw

For grace or charm, Warsaw can't match other European capitals. The city was razed by Hitler and rebuilt by Stalin. (Spared both fates, Kraków in southern Poland kept its looks and draws the tourists.) Yet in this era of euro trouble, the Polish capital has what's gone missing in Paris or Rome—a spirit of experimentation, youth culture and human dynamism breaking through the city's shabby exteriors. Take a walk through the working-class neighborhood of Wola, where bits of prewar Warsaw are interspersed among the charmless gray buildings of the communist era and unremarkable newer commercial structures. At the corner of Żelazna and Chłodna—Iron and Cold Streets—there's a white wisp of translucent polycarbonate in a gap between apartment blocks. It's a house, called the world's thinnest, four feet across at the widest point, three levels up and 150 square feet in all.

Jakub Szczęśny, an architect in his late 30s, thought up this "impossible" idea for a tiny home. "I wandered by here all the time and saw the space between a building that survived the Warsaw Ghetto and a 1960s PRL-owiec," he says, using slang for a building put up under the Communists. "There was no connection, no dialogue" between those eras, he says. "I thought it needed a link." People call it the Keret House, after the Israeli short-story writer Etgar Keret. Mr. Keret, whose mother survived the Warsaw Ghetto, agreed to become the first resident of the home, which is overseen by a foundation and opened in October. There's a kitchen and bathroom, a table and two seats, an orange bean bag in one corner and a bed upstairs. Ladders connect the floors. Claustrophobics, steer clear. It's hard to imagine this little house, "something made out of nothing," going up in any other city, says Mr. Keret, who makes his home in Tel Aviv. The new Warsaw, he says, is "a very optimistic and very vivid place."

A few blocks away, a new museum of the history of Polish Jews will be housed in an eye-catching green modernist building and previewed next month on the 70th anniversary of the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

This Warsaw will try almost anything. If Paris is a museum of the 19th century—barely touched since Baron Haussmann re-imagined the capital at Napoleon III's bequest—and New York is a creation of the 20th, then cities like Warsaw look unapologetically to the future. The past gives Poles a shudder, as does most of its architecture. Warsaw residents have little to lose or preserve.

The same might be said about modern Berlin, another scarred capital and today the hippest city in Europe. "France used to be a great cultural center, but it is so satisfied with itself and so sure of its status that it has lost everything," says Mr. Szczęśny, who studied architecture in Barcelona and Paris. "Dirty Berlin, a place of conflict, stands for a lot more than Paris."

Hard 20th-century history links Berlin and Warsaw, cities that bear a physical resemblance to each other. They have a similar vibe too, which is a product of something more recent and positive—a growing economy. Germany and Poland are the big EU countries least hurt by the crisis of the past four years. Their thriving capitals are the flip side of the story of Europe's imminent death. In the EU, Poland alone avoided recession after 2009, and Germany is its economic engine.

Warsaw's skyline reflects its emergence as the financial hub of Central and Eastern Europe—a role that Prague, Vienna and Budapest at some point aspired to play. The stock exchange has for the past few years seen the most companies go public in Europe, accounting for two out of five IPOs on the continent in 2012.

For the first time in Poland's millennium as a state, Warsaw is a magnet for immigrants, too. Younger Frenchmen and Spaniards come drawn by jobs in business and a low cost of living. They are not here for the weather, but the night life offerings help pass the long Polish winter. In my old neighborhood of Mokotów, one of the most popular bars is aptly named Regeneracja, or Regeneration. From the east come traders, craftsmen, students and service workers from Ukraine and, improbably, Vietnam, two of the most common destinations of migrants to Poland. The ascendant money and career culture has led many Poles, particularly on the right, to bemoan the collapse of moral guardrails (secular and religious) and social solidarity. But as Adam Michnik, a dissident intellectual of the left who founded the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, says: "They keep going on about there not being a 'great Polish idea' anymore. Who needs it? This country is better off now than it ever was for the past 400 years."

Any visitor will indubitably form a distinct idea of this new Warsaw. "The tradition of Warsaw has always been experimentation, mainly due to war and the destruction of war," says Mr. Szczęsny. "Warsaw is not a beautiful city. There's no chance for continuity. It's a Frankenstein who is stitched together from different parts. And those parts are coming apart—the stitches that keep the body together are very loose." It's what makes Warsaw so cool and upbeat and exciting. You can't say that about many other EU capitals.

Mr. Kaminski is a member of the Journal's editorial board.