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STREETS AND THEIR CHARACTER

ULICE I ICH CHARAKTER

Abstract

The author's intention has been to present several streets famous for being remarkable phenomena in the history of town planning and architecture. Each of them is a sum of separate buildings, sometimes outstanding but, more often than not, just elements of a bigger whole. Thorough investigations reveal the history of many particular places, their origins and individual fortunes. And yet, it is hard to decide if it is the dominant architecture of one object or a uniform style of more buildings creating frontages that matter more for the perception of an urban interior.

Keywords: street, character, specificity, architecture, urban planning

Streszczenie

Zamierzeniem autora jest przedstawienie kilku ulic znanych jako wybitne zjawiska w historii urbanistyki i architektury. Każda z nich jest sumą poszczególnych budowli, czasem wybitnie uznanych, ale częściej będących tylko elementami większej całości. Głębsze dociekania pozwalają na odnalezienie historii wielu partykularnych miejsc, ich oryginalnej historii i odrębnych losów. Ale nie można stwierdzić, czy ważniejsza dla percepcji wnętrza urbanistycznego jest dominująca architektura jednego obiektu czy też jednorodna stylistyka większej ilości budowli tworzących pierzeje.

Słowa kluczowe: ulica, charakter, specyfika, architektura, urbanistyka

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Across the world, there are places with unmistakable character, so it is impossible to mistake the streets of Krakow for the streets of Florence. On the other hand, the uniformity of the post-war architecture in Central Europe makes one get lost easily in the suburban housing estates of many cities. Yet, the character of streets, their architectural style and unique aesthetics are the values desired by local communities and temporary residents alike. These values are timeless and applicable to both historic and contemporary cities. Striving for uniqueness has been the principal incentive of creators for centuries but unparalleled urban interiors can also result from unintended or incidental acts.

1. PARIS, LES CHAMPS – ÉLYSÉES

Each street is a sum of house facades whose forms are sometimes monumental but mostly nondescript and whose specific features become clear only during facade stocktaking. At the same time, the street continuity is disrupted with the appearance of a new quality which usually dominates and introduces formal variety. A case in point is the Place Vendôme in Paris, built to a design by Jules Hardouin-Mansart in 1699, whose beauty lies in the excellent repetitiveness of the building facades.

Paris is an aggregate of perfect architecture and town planning. Georges Eugène Haussmann's once controversial project that comprised the transformation of mediaeval quarters into a modern metropolis endorses today's multifaceted image of the city. The harmonious architectural composition of particular objects resulted in a uniform style of individual streets. Nevertheless, the Champs Élysées or Elysian Fields, an imposing avenue which leads from the Louvre through the Tuilerie Garden across the Place de l'Étoile to la Defense and the Grande Arche, does not follow the original scheme. Its axis skewers several architectural epochs including radical modernism and can serve as a textbook on architecture. In fact, many years ago, a Belgian school of architecture had an educational program which required students to walk this route and observe the artefacts dating from the Middle Ages through modern times. Their perception is far from explicit, especially when it comes to contemporary accomplishments, mainly from the 20th century.

The extension of the axis of the Champs-Élysées to La Defense, a deliberate and completed move, introduced a new value to Haussmann's concept. Yet radical modernity is sometimes hard to tame. Some say that globalization makes cities change from places that give people shelter to areas *...characterized by the reign of terror and ubiquitous fear*¹. Analysing the threats resulting from modern town planning trends, Zygmunt Bauman wrote: *The place called La Defense, a huge square on the right bank of the Seine, conceived, designed and built as a lasting monument of François Mitterand's presidency – during which the glory and grandeur of the office was carefully separated from the personal weaknesses and vices of its holder – comprises all the features {...} of public but inhospitable urban space. {...} what strikes the visitor is first and foremost the inhospitability of the place: everything within sight inspires awe yet discourages staying. Fantastically shaped buildings which encircle the huge and empty square are*

¹ Z. Bauman, *Płynna nowoczesność*, (Liquid Modernity) Kraków 2006, p. 115.

meant to be looked at not in: wrapped from the top to bottom in reflexive glass, they seem to have neither windows nor entry doors; ingeniously, they manage to turn their backs to the square they face. They are imperious and impervious to the eye – imperious because impenetrable, these two qualities complementing and reinforcing each other². No wonder that the perfect asceticism of the place devoid of familiar attributes of space perceived traditionally repels even Z.Bauman who has this comment to make... it exists only to be crossed quickly and left behind³.

2. KRAKÓW, THREE POETS' AVENUE

On the other end of the scale of universal, historical and urban-architectural values there is the Three Poets' Avenue, an artery which for years has been Krakow's symbol of 20th-century town planning and architecture. Its origins date back to the 19th century but new objects are still being built there. It is like a museum of two centuries of the built environment where the dominant style is modernism.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Krakow was transformed from a small provincial town into a modern centre of culture, science and economy. Regular actions to foster the city's growth were taken after Krakow had gained autonomy. Attempts were made then to annex the neighbouring suburban districts to the city but the army successfully thwarted the plans. As a result, Krakow was one of the most overpopulated cities in Europe.

The 1890s saw a construction boom but it was only in 1910 that permission was granted for the annexation of the suburban areas. In the same year, an architectural competition for the development of the area of Greater Krakow was won by J.Czajkowski, W.Ekielski, T.Stryjeński, L.Wojtyczko and L.Wyczyński. According to their project, the avenue was to become a part of a circular road comprising the area which now covers the streets: Kamienna, Prandoty, Marchlewskiego and Powstańców Warszawy. Until 1911, the site was occupied by the circumferential railway. After this had been removed, the laying out of a wide avenue began. Some buildings had already been erected along the new street on the city side. A few of them are noteworthy. The building on the corner of Krowoderska Street and Słowacki Avenue was constructed in the 1890s. It is inconspicuous in terms of architecture but interesting because in 1902–1906, it was a place of residence of Stanisław Wyspiański. He made then several pastel sketches of the view from the window of his studio. They are among the first documents showing the avenue in the early 1900s. The circumferential railway was still operating, and behind its embankment there were only fields and gardens reaching as far as Kosciuszko Mound.

At that time, there were already all the houses in the section of Słowacki Avenue between Karmelicka street and Lenartowicza street. The frontage also included two houses built to a design by Jan Sas-Zubrzycki: one at number 7, and the other at no 9, built in 1896 and 1899, respectively. A little further, in the direction of the Vistula, there was another building in a similar style, namely, Collegium Agronomicum at no 21, Mickiewicz Avenue, and the Industrial School designed by Sławomir Odrzywołski at no 5; both completed in 1912. These

² *Ibidem*, p. 149–150.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 158.



III. 1. Paris, Champs Élysées (Photo by M.J. Żychowska)

III. 2. Kraków, Three Poets' Avenue (Photo by M.J. Żychowska)

two magnificent buildings initiated the development of the area along the thoroughfare for public utility buildings with monumental character. Subsequent years, and specifically the 20-year-long interwar period, brought more objects of this kind. They also continued to appear after World War II but their style was different from the buildings erected before 1914.

The objects mentioned above are inextricably connected with the history of the city. It is impossible to discuss the architecture of Krakow without making reference to the circumstances that surrounded or preceded its creation because it was the mood rooted in the city's tradition that determined its character and expression. It was also the case with the buildings along the Three Poets' Avenue.

The Avenue developed over the interwar period. The newly erected objects had a different form but their mood was still in keeping with the local tradition of the city. While discussing the second period in the history of the avenue, it is worth describing its appearance first. At that time, the avenue was a wide thoroughfare comprising two street lanes with greenery in the middle. The green belt was made after the fortification embankments had been levelled. Poplars and lime trees were planted there, and throughout the 20-year interwar period it was a park landscaped like the Planty Gardens. It retained its form until World War II. Most houses still standing in the area today were built then. They were largely tenement houses; modern and luxurious for their time.

One such building stands on the corner of Łobzowska Street. It is the house of the Jagiellonian University's professors and was built in 1930 to a design by Ludwik Wojtyczko. It is one of the best known and most controversial buildings in Krakow; an example of a symbiosis between classicism and stylish-decorative mannerism. Although the elevations of many of these buildings seem simplified, a closer look reveals some interesting details such as impressive friezes below the cornice. For example, the building at no 15a Słowacki Avenue features a façade with a horizontal cornice below the windows at the top level. In the space thus created between the windows, heart-shaped pattern characteristic of decorative art of the Polish highlanders is drawn with a precise line.

Other common decorative elements of the interwar tenement houses were various symbols placed over the entry gates.

There are more objects in the area which are worth mentioning and which date back to the interwar period. They were flagship buildings of Krakow at that time which also influenced the character of the avenue. One of them is the building of the Mining Academy, finally erected to a design by Sławomir Odrzywolski and Waclaw Krzyżanowski in 1922. The construction was completed in 1932, while interior decoration was done in 1938. The conversion of the attic into lecture halls in 1965–1967, combined with making windows in the entablature, ruined the balance of the façade composition. The entry stairs are flanked by two sculptures symbolizing mining and metallurgy which were made in 1979 on the occasion of the Academy's 60th anniversary and copied the originals sculpted by Jan Raszka. The miner's statue was sculpted by Bogusz Salwiński, while the author of the steelworker's statue was Jan Siek.

Another place along the avenue which deserves attention is Inwalidów Square. This excellent urban interior is created by a number of remarkable buildings. One of them is a tenement house of the Insurance Company of White-collar Workers built to a design by Waclaw Nowakowski, an interesting Krakow architect of the interwar period, in 1927–1928. The building has a distinct form. Designed according to classical rules, it attracts attention because of the cut corners which are decorative elements. On the corner of Sienkiewicza Street,



III. 3. New York, Park Avenue (Photo by M.J. Żychowska)

III. 4. Mers-les-Baines. esplanada Général-Leclerc (Photo by M.J. Żychowska)

the building features small quadrilateral balconies which, combined with the windows set at an angle, create crystal-like forms. The corners so treated make the whole frame less massive and heavy but, at the same time, highlight the building's angularity. The chiaroscuro effects achieved in this way, as well as the frieze made up of diamond and triangular shapes combine to create the artistic impression made by the building. It is just this artistic effect that makes the building an excellent example of the Cracovian architecture characterized by a specific manner of decoration. The adjacent house of the Jagiellonian University's professors was designed by a team of architects: Ludwik Wojtyczko, Stefan Żeleński, Piotr Jurkiewicz in 1927–1928. It certainly is one of the finest buildings of the interwar period. It incorporates some features of the decorative trend and many elements of classicism, evident in the composition of the façade with sgraffito decoration between the windows.

The interwar years were a period of intense development of the area along the avenue. At that time, the form of the thoroughfare was basically shaped although it was by no means final. During the German occupation, the lanes were markedly widened and the green belt was thus narrowed. This was done to improve traffic for strategic reasons.

In the post-war years, only a few buildings were raised in the area. The ones to be mentioned in the first place include the Cracovia hotel and the Kijów cinema which were built in a good modernist style to a design of Witold Cęckiewicz in 1961–1966. They completed the sequence of the monumental, single-standing buildings along the Avenue and the spatial layout of the part of the Avenue comprising the National Museum (opposite the hotel), the Jagiellonian Library, the Agricultural University and the Academy of Mining. However, in recent years, the abandoned Cracovia hotel has been acting as a huge stand for constantly changing oversized advertisement banners.

The Agricultural University at no 24/28 Mickiewicz Avenue was completed in 1964. It was one of the objects erected to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the Jagiellonian University⁴. Its designer was Stanisław Juszczyk.

Opposite the University, on the corner of Krupnicza Street, Collegium Paderevianum was built in 1965. Its origins are interesting as it was the first building whose construction was financed by the inheritance from Ignacy Paderewski, a world-famous Polish pianist. He wrote in his diaries that... *Krakow is a university town. It has one of the oldest universities in the world established in 1364. It is our Oxford – the atmosphere is similar. It is a charming and interesting city, one of the most beautiful places in Europe*⁵. He considered the money he had earned to be property of the Nation and therefore he wanted it to be given to the Jagiellonian University in Krakow⁶. In recognition of the donor's merits, in 1976 his bust was placed in the square in front of Collegium Paderevianum. Next to it, another university building was

⁴ In 1959–1964, to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the Jagiellonian University, the so-called Senate's lot was developed. The area, contained within the boundaries set by 3 Maja and Mickiewicz Avenues, Reymont Street and Dr Jordan's Park, was donated to the University by the city in the 1920s. The National Museum and the Jagiellonian library were built there. In the 1960s, development projects were made first by the architect B. Laszczka and later by the architect P. Piwowarczyk. The objects erected at that time included the Institute of Physics and Mathematics, the Institute of Biology, collegium Paderevianum, the Academy of Agriculture and Little Paderevianu.

⁵ Quoted in: W. Bodnicki, *Muzy na Krupniczej (The Muses in Krupnicza street), Kraków 1982, p. 166–166.*

⁶ *Ibidem.*



Ill. 5. Florence, Via Camillo Cavour (Photo by M.J. Żychowska)

erected in 1973 to a design of Andrzej Lipski and Konrad Wierzbicki. It is a building with office and hotel space. Its architectural style is quite original and the object attracts attention disrupting the frontage of the avenue section between Czysta Street and Krupnicza Street as the designers adjusted the object's size to that of the adjacent houses.

The Auditorium Maximum is slightly hidden behind Collegium Paderevianum. The author of the design is Stanisław Deńko with a team from the Wizja studio. Completed in the 21st century, the building attracts attention with its ceramic and glass facade. The form is massive but elegant and seems to make reference to the monumental architecture of the Avenue.

For the Senate's lot and the buildings on it, time has not stopped. New requirements and challenges entail functional transformations enforced by law and new standards of use. Understandably, this has led to some spectacular conversions of some of the objects mentioned above, such as the National Museum and the Jagiellonian Library. The Museum, which took 55 years to complete, finally assumed the form the original designers had envisaged. It is now awaiting addition of a new wing, and it is only to be hoped that the project will continue a good tradition of form and function.

As for the Jagiellonian Library, it is worth pointing out that the two stages of extension it has been through so far have produced a harmonious whole and can be considered good and valuable architecture.

All in all, both realizations, in terms of architecture and the form which combines the valuable original solutions with recent additions, can be said to have complied with the standards of appropriate and justifiable conservation intervention, and the resultant objects can still be listed as contemporary Polish cultural heritage. As such, they are living and functioning elements of the cultural environment, and therefore they are subject to aesthetic and functional transformations.

On the other hand, the ongoing construction of Paderevianum II on the most prestigious site on the corner of Krupnicza Street and Mickiewicz Avenue is a disappointment. The project was selected despite the city residents' protests and doubts raised by the architect of the city of Krakow. In 2009, the decision was made to erect two new buildings (designed by the Archimedia office from Poznan). After protests and invalidation of the building permit, a new project was made. This time, the disputed plot, which had been the bone of contention between the investor and the neighbours, was not included. The second project was worked out by the consortium of Budostal 2 and Elektromontaż, which won the tender for design-build contract. This means that based on the lowest price, the firm will both design and construct the new objects. Thus in a perfect location, in the protected area and surrounded by valuable architecture of the 20th century modernism, a randomly designed solution is emerging and ruining the quality of the space. It is a shame since the decision cannot be appealed...

Another irritating object is "Kraków" Radio built to a design of Tomasz Mańkowski, Jacek Czech, Janusz Duliński and Piotr Wróbel. The form itself is quite slick and the building seems to be hovering above ground owing to the inclined exterior walls. However, its location on a skimpy lot has completely dwarfed the neighbourhood and ruined the peace and character of the adjacent complex of listed villas in Kościelna Street, Sienkiewicz Street and Grottger Street.

The charm of the historic houses has been lost irrevocably.

Time and time again, projects are made involving the reduction or removal of the lawns and cutting down trees in the area. However, it must be made clear that despite the fact that the greenery is degraded due to heavy traffic, it still forms part of an excellent urban interior

with good and original architecture which bears testimony to the city's unique character and the 20th-century architectural achievements even though they might not be outstanding or groundbreaking.

3. NEW YORK, PARK AVENUE (FOURTH AVENUE)

New York is a city with many iconic sites such as Broadway, one of the longest streets, the Fifth Avenue with elegant shops and salesrooms, Time Square and 47th Street also known as Diamond Jewelry Way. Each of these places is unique and features buildings which have been recorded in the history of modern architecture. Park Avenue stands out in the cityscape because of the variety of Manhattan's ordinary and extraordinary skyscrapers. Each of them is different and striving to be taller, more original in terms of decoration than the others, and to have the most visible finial. Hence the variety of forms and solutions as every building must distinguish itself in order not to disappear in the crowd of others. Originality at all costs seems to be the main feature of this kind of approach to architecture. Modernism appears to have been different. It exposed innovative building technologies which used glass, steel, and concrete, promoted new aesthetics which relied on the use of basic solids, and the supremacy of function over form which translated into attractive social programs. One of its more refined manifestations was the *international style*. The sophisticated forms which were the essence of the specific aesthetics appeared, among other places, in New York's Park Avenue at the turn of the 1950s and the 1960s. The dominant aestheticism of the glazed buildings and their provocative beauty still tease and generate more criticism than enthusiasm. Nevertheless this kind of architecture has great significance in New York's cityscape and in the history of modern architecture. The monumental *Lever House* (G. Bunshaft, 1952), *Seagram Building* (Mies van de Rohe, 1958) or *XYZ Buildings*, the converted *Rockefeller Center* (Harrison, Abramovitz & Harris, 1968) are examples of excellent, original architecture despite the fact that, when duplicated and copied, they gave rise to commonplace and banal architecture.

The street's interior features transparent buildings which reveal the occupants at their desks, and even the interiors of individual rooms. Putting the users' feelings aside, a view of the architecture so designed and accomplished by several architects is impressive and awe-inspiring at times. 4. MERS-LES-BAINS, THE GENERAL-LECLERC ESPLANADE

Since ancient times, the therapeutic effect of marine climate and baths has been highly appreciated. Seaside resort towns began to appear on the coast of the English Channel (French La Manche), Belgium and northern France. Some, like Ostend, were quite famous but there were scores of smaller ones, all charming and similar to one another in many ways. They featured wide promenades along the sea coast with tall, narrow houses facing the sea. The dominant vertical composition of the sea front was far from monotonous. Picturesque buildings with high rooftops determined the city's character. The appearance of the facades was a priority and an indication of individuality necessary to meet the different tastes and requirements of the visitors to the fashionable beaches.

Mers-les-Bains, a seaside town, was transformed into a sea resort, highly-prized by the Parisians, when a railway line was built there. The unique architecture of the villas built at that time is an expression of the decorative arts from the *Art Nouveau* period at the turn of the 20th century. The buildings have a very characteristic style: they are bristling with pinnacles,

balconies and bow windows. Their architecture combines the elements of the charming local tradition and Art Nouveau motives; it reflects the atmosphere of the Belle Epoque. More than 300 houses still exist and are the only group representing the architecture of that time on the entire coastline of France. They are perfectly preserved and maintained and create a unique atmosphere of the town while bearing witness to the past epoch.

The site is protected because of the unique historic architecture typical of a seaside resort and balneological facilities. There are two protected zones: one was created in 1986 to preserve the original, most valuable part of the town. The main reason was to safeguard the town against irrevocable conversions and misguided renovations.

The other zone was established in 2008 to protect one object, namely the *RIP villa*. It is situated at no 62 Général-Leclerc esplanade (former *esplanade de la Plage*), and was built after 1894 to a design by Jules Dupont, an architect from Mers-les – Bains.

The house was named after Rip Van Winkle, the main character of Robert Planquette's operetta composed in 1884. Its libretto was based on a Dutch legend describing adventures of a man in debt who luckily finds a treasure by the Hudson River. The story is set in the 18th century.

The interior of the *RIP villa* has retained its original layout, which is exceptional as most house interiors in the town have been converted into smaller flats. Its layout is typical of this kind of house. The front rooms on the ground floor and on the higher levels open to the sea. The villa is a unique place also because it has been owned by the same family since it was built.

Yet, the town is not only architecture and cityscape. What also matters is the cultural heritage of the region with its history, tradition and the atmosphere of the coast. Another significant factor is the specific, bright and penetrating light of the northern part of Normandy which made it a popular region with the impressionist painters. This is evidenced by Claude Monet's works such as *Impression, Sunrise*, (1872) showing Le Havre port at sunrise, *Fishing boats leaving the harbour*, (1874) or *Beach at Trouville*, (1870). There is even a Polish connection. The National Museum in Poznan has in its collection Claude Monet's *Beach in Pourville*, (1882) It is the only painting by this artist in Poland. It was stolen from the Museum in 2000 and, eventually, discovered nine years later in a cupboard in Olkusz, a small town in southern Poland, where it had been hidden.

Works of impressionists and modern French art are present in the city space. Traces of the tragic 20th century history can also be seen. Two world wars swept across the city. Some fortifications, including ruins of the Atlantic Wall, are still there and continue to dominate the landscape. There are memories of landing operations such as the one by Canadian forces that liberated Mers-les-Bains. Many buildings and precious historic objects were destroyed then giving way to cemeteries.

It was only by good fortune that the urban complex of Mers-les-Bains has survived, and now is the only such site on the whole coast of France. It is a unique element of cultural heritage and an authentic record of the past. The fact that it is bustling with life makes it even more interesting.

5. FLORENCE, VIA CAMILLO CAVOUR

Urban interiors of the old town in Florence have some characteristic features and a special mood which make them fall into a separate aesthetic category. Their beauty

lies in a specific charm and *genius loci* of this remarkable city. Sometimes they seem so much alike that one can lose one's way among the repetitive frontages and house facades. However, occasionally, a street perspective reveals key buildings in the Renaissance style. In Via Camillo Cavour, for example, such an artefact is the facade of Palazzo Medici Riccardi. The palace was built to a design of Michelozzo for Cosimo de' Medici in 1444–1462. It was later reconstructed and perfected by outstanding architects and builders. In 1517, Michelangelo designed the windows for the palace. Until 1540 it was owned by the Medici family. In 1659 it became property of Gabbriello Riccardi and this fact is reflected in the name of the palace. The subsequent history of the object is equally rich; it was further extended, so that it could become the seat of the province of Florence in 1874. Its characteristic, rough elevation made of rusticated stone influenced the design of other palaces in Florence. The entrance door dominates the street and can be seen from Piazza del Duomo and Piazza San Marco. The imposing portal is like a gate between the two worlds; the intact Renaissance world enclosed within the courtyard, and the centuries – old street living the 21st – century life with its cars, shop windows and, chiefly, crowds of pedestrians, including the city residents who fail to notice the difference between modernity and tradition, and tourists looking for the beauty contained within the walls of historic buildings.

6. CONCLUSION

Some of the above examples of avenues and streets have been replicated, on a larger or smaller scale, as models for others. They are still admired and analysed. They often appear in educational programs. On the one hand, they are historical records, also as far as their elements, i.e. individual houses, are concerned. On the other hand, they contribute to the cityscape as a whole. There are many similar places which have not been mentioned in the paper but whose significance is unquestionable, such as the Viennese Ring, one of the key solutions in contemporary town planning.

There are also streets famous for iconic buildings. They cannot be confused with others, just because their general appearance is determined by this dominant element.

In both cases, it is the unique aesthetics that is expected by both local residents and temporary visitors. It is a timeless value which applies to historic places and contemporary objects alike. For centuries, artists have been striving to create unique works. However, unique urban interiors can also result from unintended acts, and yet be as highly-prized as deliberate actions of town planners.

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