

# KRAKÓW, THE OLD TOWN - A CONTINENTAL VENICE

**Maria Urmă\***

**Abstract:** Surviving the destructions of the war, the old town of Krakow is a lesson of architecture and urbanism through the multitude of architectural styles, coherence and urban continuity. These features were preserved despite the numerous stages of construction, just as in San Marco Square from Venice, thus proving the power of consolidation of the values which had naturally been constituted, in time.

**Keywords:** *Krakow, Old town, Architectural ensemble, Urban coherence, Conservation*

## **Historical marks**

Krakow, the cultural, academic and artistic centre, the main economic centre of Poland, is the second largest city and one of the oldest in Poland. It has a population of approximately 760.000 inhabitants and the metropolitan area has 8 million people.

It was the capital of Poland from 1038 to 1569.

The origins of the city can be found in a small settlement in the Stone Age, on the present site of Wawel Hill. Constituted as a small village on this hill, the settlement existed since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and there lived the tribe *Wiślanie*. In 965, it started to be mentioned as a trade centre, and from 1190 dates the first mentioning of the Prince Krakus (Grakch).

In 990, Krakow was added to Poland, led by Boleslav I of Poland who built Wawel Complex and the first cathedral of the town.

In 1241, the town was almost completely destroyed during the Mongolian invasion. It was rebuilt in 1257, but it was destroyed again in 1259 by the Mongols. In 1287, there was a third attack but this time it was partially rejected by the new fortifications.

In 1364, the town became prominent when king Casimir III of Poland founded the University of Krakow<sup>1</sup> (today the Jagiellonian University, the second oldest university in Central Europe after Charles University from

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\* Professor, PhD. dr. Architect, National University of Arts, "George Enescu" Iași, România, e-mail: urma3@yahoo.com.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Beattie & Tim Pepper, *Landmark Visitor Guide, Krakow*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Landmark Publishing, Ashbourne Hall, England, 2003, page 9.



Prague). In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Golden Age of Poland<sup>2</sup>, the majority of art and architecture masterpieces belonging to the Polish Renaissance were created, including the old synagogues from the Jewish quarter Kazimierz.

In 1596, Sigismund III moved the administrative capital of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from Krakow to Warsaw.

In 1866, after the defeat of Austria in the Austro-Prussian War, the city of Krakow became the national symbol of Polish and an artistic and cultural centre, often called the “Polish Athens” or the “Polish Mecca”.

In November 1914, the city was besieged by the Russian army. In 1918, when the Austrian domination ended, Krakow became the first important independent city from the new republic. From this moment on, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Krakow reaffirmed its role of great national academic and artistic centre through the foundation of new universities. It became an influential centre of Jewish spiritual life, the city housing three religious cults: Orthodox, Hasidic and Reformed. But, after the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Nazi Germany transformed the city into the capital of the General Government based in Wawel Castle. Between 1939 and 1944, the Nazis killed almost all the Jews from Krakow<sup>3</sup>. Although robbed by the German invaders, Krakow remained undamaged at the end of World War II, preserving most of the historical and architectural heritage of the city.

### **Urbanism and architecture**

The Old Town (*Stare Miasto*) is the most representative historical centre of the country; it has been the royal capital of Poland for many centuries. The medieval Old Town is among the first sites chosen for the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, being registered as the Historical Centre of Krakow since 1978.

The historical centre of Krakow comprises 3 urban sites: the Old Town, the Jewish district of Kazimierz and Wawel Castle.

The construction of the city started from an original heart which was the centre of the city, spreading towards the exterior. For this reason the monuments of architecture may be observed chronologically starting from the centre to the outskirts. Unlike most historical cities, the architecture and structure of the Old Town survived all the cataclysms of the past and maintained its original form from the Middle Ages.

Developed along many centuries, Krakow presents numerous architectural styles. Here one can find Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque buildings. The value is obvious both in the architectural and city planning

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<sup>2</sup> Norman, Davies, Norman. [\*God's Playground: A History of Poland\*](#). A History of Poland, volume I, The Origins to 1875, Oxford University Press, 2005, page 118.

<sup>3</sup> Mordecai Paldiel, [\*The Path of the Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust\*](#), KTAV Publishing House, 1993, New Jersey, page 177.

ensemble and at the level of architectural or art object. The monuments of architecture comprise valuable architectural details and works of art (frames, stained glass, paintings, sculptures, pieces of furniture).

### **The Old Town (*Stare Miasto*)**

The city planning of the Old Town (*Stare Miasto*) – the town of the merchants from the 13<sup>th</sup> century – was projected in 1257, after the destructions suffered during the Tartar invasions from 1241, followed by the raids from 1259 and the ones rejected in 1287 (Fig.1).

The Medieval Krakow was surrounded by a defense wall of 3 km, completed with 46 towers and seven main gates. The fortifications around the Old Town were built during two centuries<sup>4</sup>.



Fig. 1. Krakow's Historical Centre

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the fortifications that surrounded the Old Town were demolished and the defense channel that surrounded the walls was filled with ground and transformed into a green belt, known as Planty Park.

**Planty Park** is the most famous park from Krakow, founded between 1822 and 1830 on the place of the old walls, forming a green belt around the Old Town. It consists of a chain of small gardens designed in different styles in which one may find monuments of art and architecture. It has an area of 21.000 square meters and a length of 4 km, being a promenade place for the locals (Fig.2).

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<sup>4</sup>Andrew Beattie & Tim Pepper, *Landmark Visitor Guide, Krakow*, Landmark Publishing, Ashbourne Hall, England, page 29

### ***The Royal Road***

The historic centre is crossed by the Royal Road, the coronation route of Polish kings. The Royal Road passed in the past, during coronations, from Saint Florian's Church, in the north of the town, to Wawel Cathedral and Wawel Castle, the royal residence in the south of the town.



Fig. 2. Planty Park

Today, the route may be crossed starting from St. Florian's Church (which is outside the northern walls of the town, in the medieval suburb of Kleparz), crossing the Matejko Square, passing through the outpost of Krakow (Barbakan, built in Gothic style in 1499) (Fig.3 A) and entering *Stare Miasto* through Florian Gate (Fig.3 B,C), continuing along Florianska Street, passing through the Main Square and then leads down Grodzka Street to Wawel, ex-residence of the kings of Poland. From this hill, at an altitude of 228 meters, one may see a panoramic view of the River Vistula (Fig.3).



Fig. 3. A. Barbakan outpost; B. Florian Gate; C. Florian Gate entrance



**The Main Square (*Rynek Główny*)** was from the beginning the centre of the town. It dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and it has a surface of approximately 40.000 square meters, being the largest medieval square in Europe. The main function of the square was trade. After the destruction of the town by the Mongolian invasions in 1241, the main square was reconstructed in 1257 and its commercial role grew (Fig.4),.



Fig. 4. The Main Square

It is a wide square, surrounded by residential buildings (*kamienice* = townhouses), noble residences, palaces and churches. The centre of the square is dominated by the Cloth Hall (*Sukiennice*), reconstructed in 1555 in the style of the Renaissance. On one side of the Hall, there is the Town Hall Tower (*Wieża Ratuszowa*), on the other side there is the St. Wojciech Church (St. Adalbert) from the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the Adam Mickiewicz Monument. On the side of the square there is the Gothic Tower of St. Mary's Basilica (*Kościół Mariacki*) (Fig. 5).

The marginal buildings in the Main Square, old brick buildings and palaces are all several centuries old. Most buildings have received in time a Neoclassic aspect, but the main structures are old, a thing that may be

observed in architectural details (frames of doors, interior decorations) (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. The southern side of the Square

The Cloth Hall (*Sukiennice*), originally projected in the 14<sup>th</sup> century as a centre for the textiles trade, was destroyed by a fire in 1555. Then, it was reconstructed in Renaissance style by Giovanni il Mosca from Padua. The arches were added in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today the ground floor, used for commerce, shelters many shops, cafés and restaurants. On the upper floor, there is the Gallery of the National Museum (*Sukiennice Museum*) (Fig. 7).





Fig. 6. Marginal buildings. Southern side. Entrance on Grodzka Street



Fig. 7. The Cloth Hall

St. Mary's Basilica (Kościół Mariacki), placed at the entrance to the square through Floriańska Street, built with Roman brick, is representative for the Gothic style. It was built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century on the ruins of an older church destroyed by the Tartars in 1241. Inside of it, there is an altar in late Gothic style, created by the German sculptor Veit Stoss (Wit Stwosz) between 1477 and 1489, considered the largest Gothic altar in the world. Also inside of it, there are valuable mural paintings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by Jan Matejko, as well as stained glass created by Stanislaw Wispianski (Fig. 8).



Fig.8. St. Mary's Basilica



Fig. 9. Church of St. Wojciech (St. Adalbert)

Church of St. Wojciech (St. Adalbert)

It is one of the oldest stone churches in Poland, the oldest part of the church dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the church was partially reconstructed in the Baroque style. The periods of construction may be observed in the mixture of styles: Pre-Romanesque, Romantic, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque (Fig. 9).



Fig. 10. The Church of St. Barbara

Church of St. Barbara

It was founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. During the Austrian occupation, here it was the main praying site. It was rebuilt many times. In 1583 it was renovated on the interior in the Baroque style, while the exterior remained



Gothic. Next to the main entrance there is the *Gethsemane* ensemble from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the interior, there is the valuable sculptural ensemble *Pieta* from the 15<sup>th</sup> century as well as the ceiling painted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 10).

Town Hall Tower, which is 68 m high, is all that is left from the town hall built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, destroyed by fire and eventually pulled to pieces by the Austrians at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Town Hall Tower



Fig. 12. Adam Mickiewicz Monument

Adam Mickiewicz Monument (a Polish Romantic poet from the 19<sup>th</sup> century) placed in the axis of the side entrance of the hall, is a statuary

ensemble. Originally the work of the Polish sculptor Teodor Rygiel, presented in 1898, was destroyed during World War II. The monument was rebuilt in 1955. Since most pieces were recuperated from scrap iron, the reconstruction of the original aspect was possible (Fig. 12).

## Underground

Under the square, in the past, there were large cellars.

Most of the spaces from the basement were transformed into bars, restaurants and cultural functions. Here there were installed: *Maszkaron* theatre, the small archaeologic museum from the basement of the Church of St. Adalbert and the *Rynek Underground* museum (the Historical Museum of Krakow), in the eastern side of the Square. In this museum, archaeological digging revealed 1000 years of medieval history (Fig. 13).

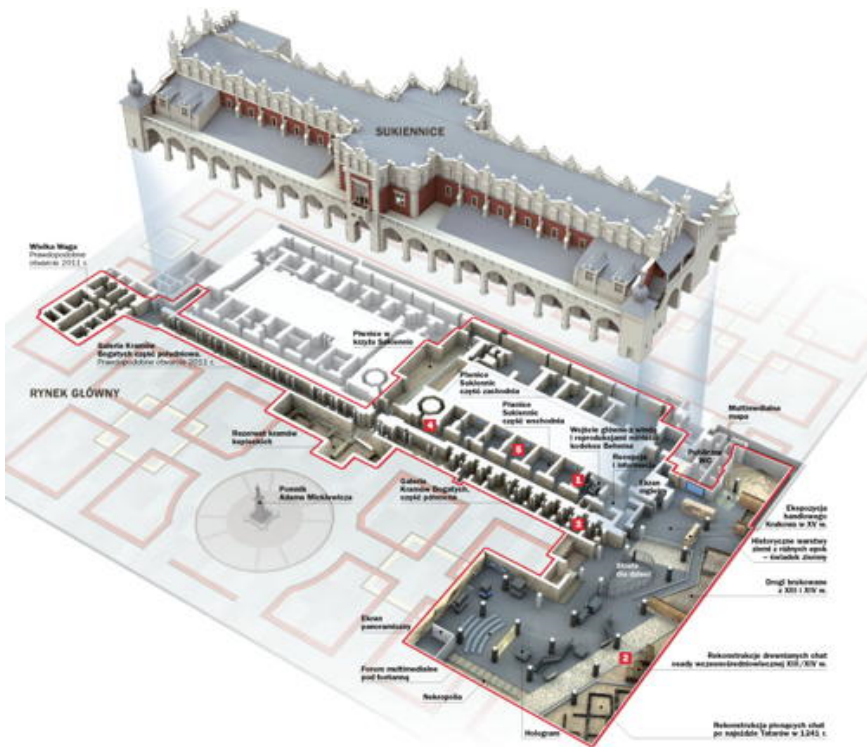


Fig. 13. The Historical Museum of Krakow

## Postmodern Art

A good example of insertion of an art object within a historic space is the work of the Polish artist Igor Mitoraj, *Éros Bendato*, created in 1999 and



placed in the square in 2003. The sculpture, a large bronze portrait, integrates within the historic aspect of the square through the material used and through the figurative approach. The exacerbation of the dimensions offers it similitudes with the towering buildings around it, through monumentality.



Fig. 14. Igor Mitoraj, *Éros Bendato*, 1999

The work is, in the same time, an installation art through its interactive character: the volume is empty and there is the possibility of reaching into it as into an architectonic space, offering open views on the surrounding environment. It is a successful contemporary invention, in which harmony is achieved both through similitude and contrast (Fig. 14).



Fig. 15. Grodzka Street



Fig. 16. A. The Dominica Monastery;  
B. Church St. Peter and Paul, Church St. Andrew.

**Grodzka Street** was the main axis of Krakow, before the concentration in 1257 of the medieval town in the area of the Main Square. Leading to Wawel Castle and Wawel Cathedral, this street has witnessed all the ceremonies that have taken place in time (Fig. 15).



The most important monuments along this street are: at the entrance from the Main Square, on the left the Gothic Basilica of the Holy Trinity, next to the Dominican Monastery from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 16 A), on the right the Roman Basilica of St. Francis, next to the Franciscan Monastery.



Fig. 17. St. Mary Magdalene Square

Next, one may find the Renaissance Palace *Wielopolskich* from 1560, which became the town hall of Krakow in 1865. Down the street, in the St. Mary Magdalene Square, there is the Baroque Church St Peter and Paul built in 1619, together with the Roman Church St Andrew built in 1090 (Fig. 16 B, 17).



Fig. 18. Wawel Castle seen from Vistula River



Fig. 19. Wawel ensemble

Wawel was the first centre of political power at the end of the first millennium AD and royal centre in the 9th century. Until 1611, this was the official residence of the Polish monarchy.

The Wawel Cathedral was the coronation place for the kings of Poland and mausoleum, later on becoming the national Pantheon. In recent years, Wawel has been restored, becoming a national museum, a religious place and centre which illustrates the complex history of Poland (Fig. 18, 19, 20).



Fig. 20. Wawel Cathedral



**The Jewish district of *Kazimierz***

Next to the old Town there is the former Jewish district of the city, *Kazimierz*.

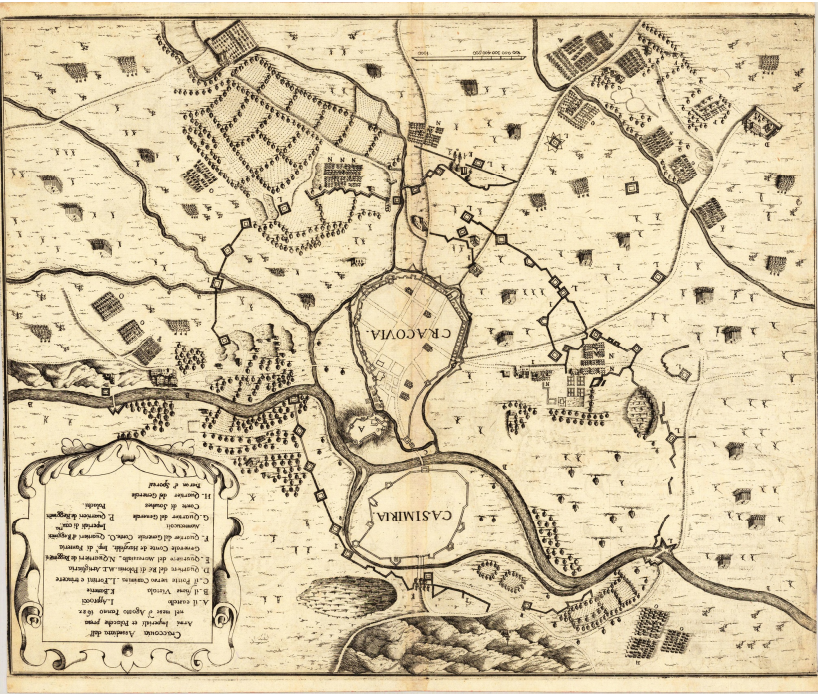


Fig. 21. The plan of the old site of Krakow with Kazimierz district 1687



Fig. 22. Old buildings in *Kazimierz*



It is an urban area valuable from an architectural and urbanistic point of view because of its numerous Renaissance buildings and picturesque streets (Fig. 21). It was founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century on the south-east of the city centre, quickly becoming a rich and populated area. In 1930, in the entire Old Town there were 120 synagogues and prayer houses officially registered.

Many of the historic buildings in the centre of Kazimierz are today preserved in their original aspect. A few old buildings were never restored after the destruction of World War II and remained empty. In 1993, the efforts of restoring historical districts started afresh.

## Conclusions

The Old Town of Krakow stands out through the complete and coherent preservation on large areas of the architectural and urban ensembles. The various periods of construction, from the 9<sup>th</sup> century until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, transform the crossing of the Town into a lesson of culture and history, into a genuinely applied school.

In this context, the architectural information about Krakow is dense and diverse. The town surprises us with the variety and coherence of images, starting from the general aspect to a detailed one.

The amplexness of the preserved urban areas of historic interest, the continuity of architectural ensembles, the urban coherence constituted in centuries of history, the diversity of details, the complexity of artistic images, reveal an urban, architectural and artistic ensemble of great value. From this perspective, we may interpret the town as a continental alternative to Venice, with similarities and contrasts worthy to be studied. *A lot has been written about the history of Krakow and its monuments, but the meaning of the structure of the medieval town still awaits a proper study*<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, the Main Square, as part of a larger urban ensemble that is the Old Town, naturally reveals itself on the way without contrasts between old and new, often encountered in the majority of the European historic centres.

The continuity of the buildings in fronts, the possibility of successive discovery, in the same urban area, of various historical periods, the individuality of the monuments, as well as the artistic value of details and of the objects of architecture, the coherent formation along ten centuries of history make the Main Square an urban piece that may be compared to San Marco Square from Venice, regarding the environmental, urban and architectural value. Ulewicz once said "*Cracovia altera Roma*"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [Węclawowicz Tomasz](#), "Medieval Krakow and its Churches" in *Lidé města / Urban People*, 9, 2007, 1, page 55, <http://www.lidemesta.cz>, last seen on 28 April 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ulewicz, T., apud Róża Goduła Węclawowicz, "Urban Anthropology. Little Narratives about Krakow and Saint Petersburg" in *Ethnologia Polona*, 2012-2013, 33-34, page 97, <http://rcin.org.pl>, last viewed on 10 April 2017.

The same features may be discovered on Grodzka Street and in Wawel architectural ensemble.

The Jewish district surprises with its amplex and age, offering the visitor the possibility of a true journey back in time. All the buildings and art objects have value in themselves, but they also have a value amplified by the advantage of belonging to a coherent ensemble, formed along the centuries, entirely preserved.

*These “central places” of Krakow play their own roles at the same moments and they cumulate their meanings. They are complementary one to another. In the social memory they exist together.*<sup>7</sup> The ample continuity of the urban route marked by outstanding points of cultural interest, transforms the walk into a pleasant and in the same time exciting activity, full of surprises, comparable to the exploration of Venice, but this time of a continental Venice.

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<sup>7</sup> Róża Godula Węclawowicz, *KRAKOW: GENIUS LOCI OF THE TOWN SPACE* in *Lidé města / Urban People*, 9, 2007, 1, page 48, <http://www.lidemesta.cz>, last seen on 17 April 2017.

Fig. 21. The plan of the old site of Krakow with Kazimierz district, 1687;

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