

KRAKOW: *GENIUS LOCI* OF THE TOWN SPACE

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Abstract:

This paper aims to analyze the urban space of Krakow and studies the role of specific sites such as Cathedral Hill, the Main Market Square, and the Church on the Rock which convey specific significance to the inhabitants. The basic categories of culture – “space” and “time” – are used in the anthropological sense (viz. Czarnowski and Eliade), and help to explain the unique character of Krakow’s genius loci.

Keywords: *Krakow; town space; urban anthropology*

The phenomenon of urban space involves architects, historians and anthropologists. For the latter what is most important is actually the imagined space which exists only in social consciousness, in a social meaning. Urban space is not a continuous one. It has various places, various meanings. There are some typical words used in this case: a magic and mysterious place, the genius of the place – *genius loci*. Poles think, “What a wonderful town Krakow is, how unique, what special atmosphere it has.” Lots of tourists can say the same about Paris, Munich, New York, or about Prague, of course. Some say, “*Cracovia altera Roma*,” which means, “Krakow, the second Rome” or “Krakow – the Polish Athens.” (Ulewicz 1994)

What is the reason for such feelings? It is not its metropolitan status, because little towns like Sorrento or Avignon can be as nice as big capital cities. It is also not a question of architectural monuments, because not every monument has its own specifics which attract tourists and pilgrims, which inspire poets and painters. So the force that attracts people is not connected with material urban space, but rather with one’s image of the space.

“Space” and “time” are basic categories of culture – universal forms and ideas through which people perceive reality and can build their own picture of the world. The experiences of “space” and “time” cause every particular fragment of them to be valued in different ways. Stephan Czarnowski and Mircea Eliade conceive of time and space as structures created by myth, or as the results of mythical feeling. The highest values are connected with the central point. The centre is marked as one’s “own” safe place or the sacred place for religious people (Czarnowski 1925; Eliade 1949).

The “centre of Krakow” is commonly considered to be the Old Town of Krakow. “To visit Krakow” means “to visit the Old Town”. The simple words: “to go to town” mean “to go to the Old Town”, to the old Main Market Square or to any street nearby. Such cases are easy to notice in every mono-centric, historic town. What is the reason for this? So-called old towns mean historic centres of modern European towns. They were built in the past as geometrically planned areas crowded with houses and churches and they were surrounded by city defensive walls. Besides, people who lived there in the past, inside the walls, had a special social status, much higher than inhabitants of the suburbs. This structure was permanently registered in social memory through the centuries and it still is. It was common in the mid-nineteenth century to change the medieval defensive walls into park promenades. In the same way some two hundreds years ago the Old Town of Krakow was surrounded by a green ring of park trees. The centre and the borders of the town space are still clearly visible today and they are fixed in everyone’s mind.

The Krakow Main Market Square was created in the mid-thirteenth century, but it still is the centre of the twenty-first-century town. The Main Market Square is connected not only with everyday life (administrative and commercial), but also with cultural and religious life as well. It was, and still is, crowded with people when various ceremonies take place there. It is really a large square. All Krakovians consider it the most magnificent medieval square in the whole of Europe and they are very proud of it. The Main Market Square with the Renaissance Cloth Hall, the Gothic Town Hall tower and the surrounding houses and palaces is a really nice place. It creates a part of the so-called Krakow dream about its glorious past. For centuries Krakow was the royal capital of Poland but lost this function at the very end of the sixteenth century. The memory of it is still evident in the common image of Krakow of the inhabitants themselves. Such an experience often occurs in various old towns of Middle Europe.

What else composes the picture of the ‘centre’ in the Main Market Square? In the northern corner stands the huge parish church of St. Mary. This church also seems to be part of the above-mentioned specific, mythical dream. All Krakovians think this is the oldest and most attractive church, though art historians do not agree. In fact, inside the church there are many works of art of the highest quality and among them the huge Gothic sculptured altar made by Veit Stoss, who came to Krakow from Nuremberg at the end of the 15th century. It is commonly thought that his creativeness placed him among the Kings and Patron Saints – all the persons who play the main roles in “Krakow’s dream”.

The higher tower of St Mary’s Church belongs not to the Church but to the town. All year long, on every hour, a guard plays a trumpet call from the top of this tower. In May and in October early mornings he also plays traditional religious songs dedicated to St Mary. The hourly trumpet call is connected with a medieval legend about a Mongolian invasion when one of the Mongols killed the St Mary’s church guard with an arrow. This call has been transmitted by Polish State Radio every day at noon since 1927. So every day at noon Krakow’s Main Market Square with its parish Church becomes, for a few minutes, the centre of Poland (replacing the capital city of Warsaw!). Marking the noon hour by similar trumpet calls or by the peal of bells in the old tower-clocks is not rare in old towns all over Poland and all over Middle Europe. Everywhere the meaning of these sounds is the same – marking an image of the centre of the town and remembrance of the glorious past.

Moreover, the meanings and values of Main Market Square as the “central” place are fixed periodically by an annual cycle of religious ceremonies. These are, first of all: the Corpus Christi procession in May or June, a special mass in St Mary’s church devoted to St Joseph, one of the patron saints of the town (the 19th of March) and a special mass and a church fair on Assumption Day (the 15th of August).

Besides, there are also occasional celebrations on anniversaries of important historic events. These are commonly felt to be substitutes for the old royal ceremonies which took place on Main Market Square some hundreds of years ago (Pilichowska 1993; Rozek 1993).

Another parallel ‘centre’ of Krakow is the royal castle and the cathedral. Both are located on the hill called by an ancient Celtic name Wawel (Wavell). Here one can dream the genuine royal dream of Krakow while walking round the arcade courtyard and down the nave of the Gothic cathedral. Here are the former royal residence and royal coronation place and here is the royal necro-

Krakow, Wawel Cathedral, Woman from the Highland praying at Ara Patriae. [Photo: T. Węclawowicz]



polis. After the tragic fall of the Polish kingdom at the end of the eighteenth century, the kings were replaced by rulers of the national soul, which means by eminent romantic poets and national heroes. They were buried in the crypts of the cathedral, close to the kings’ tombstones. In the middle of the cathedral there is the shrine of St Stanislaw, one of the main patron saints of Poland. In the nineteenth century it was commonly considered as *Ara Patriae* – the altar of the homeland. A hundred years ago they called Wawel the “Polish Acropolis” (Miodonska-Brookes 1994). Until today its values are of the highest level:



*Krakow, Processional ceremony with relics of the Patron Saints from Wawel Hill
[photo. T. Węclawowicz]*

spiritual, religious, and many others connected with the national history. The cathedral on Wawel Hill relates to the memory of Karol Wojtyla as bishop of Krakow and as Pope John Paul II.

The second national ‘pantheon’ and, at the same time, a third parallel centre is located on a hill called the Rock. According to a medieval legend, here in the church was the place where the Krakow bishop St Stanislaw was killed by King Boleslaw. Since the end of the nineteenth century in the church crypt there has been a necropolis of Polish intellectuals: writers, poets, composers.

In fact, the “Church on the Rock” is located outside the old town of Krakow, far to the south, but in the mental space, on the mental map of the town it belongs to old Krakow.

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. First of all they mark the “sacred” space of the town. The term “sacred” is used in the wider, anthropo-



*Krakow, Main Market Square, Easter Saturday ceremony in front of the St Mary’s Church
[photo A. Bujak after A. Bujak, Mystical Krakow, Krakow 1996]*

logical sense. Sacred (*sacrum*) is the opposite of secular (*profanum*). Sacred is used not only in the religious meaning. It is a category of things and behaviours which the common people consider unusual and different from the everyday case and connected with great values.

In Krakow the sacred value of a space has several levels of meaning:

- the first one – a religious one
- the second one – a national and patriotic one
- the third one – connected with artistic features
- and the fourth one – connected with folk and popular culture.

Those sacred values of the Krakow space are periodically recalled with the different rituals and ceremonies which take place on Main Market Square and on nearby streets.

The first point mentioned above is related to the vivid religious cults of Corpus Christi, St. Stanislaw and St Mary. Periodic processions are organized that go from Wawel Hill to Main Market Square (and back) and from Wawel



*Krakow, Main Market Square, traditional Horseman (Lajkonik) dance on the eighth day after Corpus Christi Day [photo: A. Bujak after A. Bujak, *Mystical Krakow*, Krakow 1996]*

Hill to the Church on the Rock (and back). They attract thousands of people not only from Krakow but also from other Polish towns and villages. What is most important is that this is a periodic cycle, year after year, ages old.

The second point is that the ceremonies are connected with the anniversaries of the main national events; we can call this “sacred national history.” The way of celebration is always the same: a mass in the cathedral; next a procession through the streets of the Old Town to the “Katyn Cross” – a symbol



*Krakow, The Church on the Rock, sarcophagi of famous Poles in the church crypt. [fot. A. Bujak after A. Bujak & M. Rozek, *Krakow*, Krakow 1989]*

of Poles murdered by the Soviets during the Second World War – and then along the so-called Royal Road to the tomb of the Unknown Warrior placed in front of the monument dedicated to the victory over the Teutonic Knights in the Middle Ages. Another example is the anniversary of the eighteenth-century Kosciuszko insurrection celebrated on Main Market Square. It is significant that the remembrance still remains. It means the past is very important nowadays and tradition is present in modern times.

The third point was mentioned as connected with artistic features. This creates a “very Krakow” atmosphere of happenings on the streets – annual festivals of street theatre – and also summer concerts named “Music in Old Krakow” taking place in ancient halls, courts and gardens.

The fourth point is connected with folk and popular Krakow tradition alive in cyclical rituals and events. Among them is an orientally dressed horseman riding a wooden horse dancing on the streets on the eighth day after Corpus Christi Day. Every year inhabitants of Krakow meet their President and

their Archbishop on Main Market Square to wish one another Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and Happy Easter. For a few they have organized there Christmas Eve supper and Easter entertainment for poor people. All these folk and popular events are joined with commercial activities, so it is not easy to distinguish which one is religious, which is folk and popular or which is purely commercial.

We dare say: urban space is filled with social memory. It is created by ideas, images and meanings. The “signs of remembrance” can have material shapes like churches, buildings, street names, or monuments. Some of these “places” are associated with famous persons. One of them was Archbishop Karol Wojtyła. He spent over forty years in Krakow and from 1978 he returned several times as Pope John II. He lived in many houses and he celebrated masses in many churches. As a result he created “his own space” in Krakow.

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The common image of a town is composed not only of material elements and material values but, primarily, of non-material values. When a town loses its inhabitants with their traditions and their dreams, it loses its identity. The image of the town belongs to them. They take it with them and the new inhabitants can create a new identity.

Luckily Krakow is a unique town where society has been stable through the centuries. But in Polish history there were spectacular events when the population of several big towns were forced to move to the west, e.g., people from the old Polish town of Lvov were moved to Wrocław (Breslau). So today's Lvov in Ukraine is quite a different town from what it was before the last war, though all the architectural monuments still stand in good condition. Wrocław (Breslau) in Lower Silesia is also a quite different town from before 1945. It was fascinating and at the same time tragic to see how the people from Lvov settled in Wrocław and tried to create a second Lvov there. The idea of the native town was more vivid than the realities of the new place. But they were not successful. The next generation created a new world of its own there. Not better and not worse than the previous one. Simply – a new one.

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