

The constitutive function of social and cultural heterogeneity for the urban space of Cracow around 1900.

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Cracow around 1900 and Today

Cracow is the “spiritual and cultural capital of Poland”, a “national reliquary” or the “small Rome”. At least that is what the city was called around 1900. Today it is still generally associated with religion, cultural (above all architectural) heritage, and the national spirit. In the context of international competitions between cities to attract public attention, a clear and unmistakable image of the city is necessary. In the case of Cracow, rapidly growing tourist rates verify the importance of a well-known image.

Cracow is proud of its history, of its achievements in high culture, its institutions of learning, its festivals and its landscape of bars and cafes. The protection and renovation of historical monuments rank among the main municipal tasks. The city and its inhabitants are often (self-)described as bourgeois and catholic, and they see their hometown as both a national and a European centre.

One of the aims of the research project presented here is to describe the interrelations between this strong local identity and a distinctive image of the city, and to show how it affected the urban space. Or, to phrase a question from the opposite angle: What can the public urban space – its spatial and institutional setting, its usage and its discursive and pictorial representation – tell us about a specific city habitus, about its image and the inner conflicts of its construction?

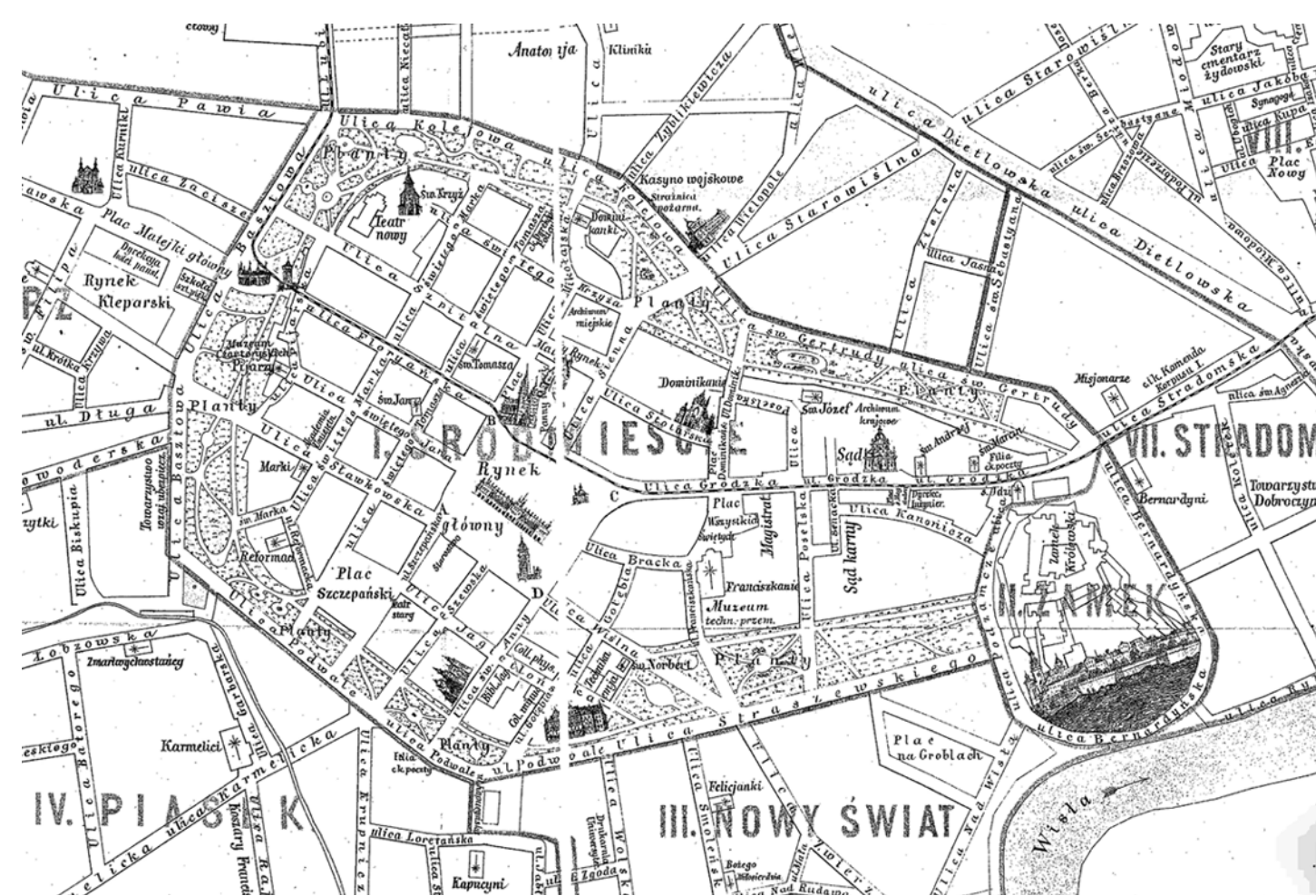
The starting point for answering this question is the observation that most of the aforementioned elements of the image and habitus of the city already exist in the 19th century. Around 1900 specific conditions (e.g. modernity, urbanization, nationalization, political reforms) led to their spread and stabilization.

Theoretical Perspective

The methodological focus on the concept of space in this project is based on several considerations: First, to ask about the image of a city is to ask about its perception. This in turn is in large parts a spatial process, a question of the relativity of positions, of the significances of places and spaces, of their functions, usages and arrangements. That leads to a further consideration: For some years there has been a growing interest in space in the cultural sciences – the so-called spatial turn. Based on the awareness of space as socially and culturally constructed, a lot of theoretical and methodical concepts and terms have been developed to utilize space as a category of analysis. This toolbox offers new ways of writing about a city beyond the traditional urban history that often reproduces common narratives and images. The spatial perspective focuses on the complexity of urban society and connects material aspects with imaginary ones.

CASE STUDIES

Different views on the urban space of Cracow around 1900 can reveal techniques of constructing the image of the city. In the following I want to present three examples of the interrelation between space and image.



City Map, 1891



Galeria
Krakowska,
2008

1 THE CITY AS A PANTHEON

The concept of the pantheon is defined as a place where great men or heroes are assembled. It is the materialization of a canon that should be binding for a specific group of people – it is a lieu de mémoire. In Cracow you can find numerous such places. The first and foremost of these is the cathedral on the Wawel with the graves of the Polish kings and other heroes like Adam Mickiewicz or Tadeusz Kościuszko. Second, there is the crypt on the hillock Skalka, which became a pantheon of persons of outstanding merit, like the artists Stanisław Wyspiański and Henryk Siemiradzki. Another small pantheon is the central part of the 1889 founded Park Jordana with its marmoreal busts of historical heroes of the nation. The Rakowicki cemetery, too, was an outstanding place of memorable persons, for instance the so-called Kwaterna R with the graves for the Polish insurrectionists. It can be shown that, beyond these places, the entire old town of Cracow has characteristics of a pantheon. It is a spatially confined area, more and more changeless in its material form, it is pseudo-sacralized by national discourse and rituals, and it is full of places connected to outstanding historical persons or events. The old town of Cracow is understood as a book telling the canonized narratives of the nation and the city and hence functions as a pantheon.

2 MOVEMENT MAKES SPACE

“Space is a place subjected to a practice.” (Michel de Certeau)

This applies to physical movement, too. Depending on whether you walk through a city or go by tram, your experience of the environment will be substantially different. And a city changes its appearance with growing traffic or during the staging of a procession. The comparison of three different kinds of movement through the city shows the significance of practice in the constitution of urban space. For example, with a view to the green belt Planty – a popular promenade around the centre – social distinctions and hierarchies can be seen. Walking through this park served to self-express, to practice a bourgeois-aristocratic habitus, to continue writing the form of the old medieval Cracow and to read its connotation as a pseudo-sacral space. Another example is the procession during festivities and jubilees taking place in Cracow. On several occasions the city organized celebrations and a comparison between them leads to a set of questions: What can the procession tell us about inner social hierarchies? Which contents are communicated and how do they change over the years? In what way can these contents be inscribed in the city to specifically connote urban space? Lastly, a view on the electric tramways shows how they changed the perception of the city. They mark the transition between the old and often conservative Cracow and the influences of accelerated modernity.



500-year-Grunwald jubilee, 1910

3 ICONS AND PICTURES

Figurative representations often structure the imagination of an urban ensemble. Widespread pictures of selective spots and objects are substitutional for the whole city. Analyzing them shows the separation between important sites and places worth seeing and, on the other hand, locations that do not take part in the process of creating an urban identity. But pictures and iconic symbols also tell specific stories about Cracow. Illustrations of the urban panorama as well as the emblem of the city accentuate the towers and steeples. They produce an imaginary urban landscape which express the significance of religion and medieval pugnacity. On every city map the old town stands out because of the green belt Planty. Its form became an iconic symbol for the whole city that can, for example, be seen in modern shopping malls. But descriptions of Cracow in literary texts also influence the imagination of the city. Cracow is therefore not infrequently closely connected with its surroundings. In so doing, the city and its connotations become naturalized in a national narrative about native soil.



Veduta, end of 16th century; in a tourist guidebook from 1891

Conclusion

Based on the thesis that Cracow stabilized around 1900 and spread its image, the research project aims to show the consequences of this process today. Many elements of this image are still active and continue to represent the city as part of a 19th century national narrative. But new elements can also be found and one might question how these fit into the present image. Is a change taking place or has the rigid traditional image and perception of the city caused a specific Cracowian habitus?