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## HOUSE FAÇADES IN A TRADITIONAL CITY – ON THE EXAMPLE OF KRAKOW TOWN HOUSES

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### FASADA DOMU W MIEŚCIE TRADYCYJNYM – NA PRZYKŁADZIE KAMIENIC KRAKOWSKICH

#### Abstract

The way the houses look in a traditional city is influenced, inter alia, by building laws, size and shape of the building plot, local conditions and climate, materials used, and building techniques. The cultural traditions from different regions differentiate the choices made for the town houses' architectural elements. They create characteristic and diverse solutions (the roof form, local materials) connected to the history of the cities. Thanks to this, the houses are rooted in a rich tradition of local views, materials and techniques. Krakow town houses from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can serve as an example. They evolved maintaining the structural-architectural essence of their forms and the elements characteristic for the local tradition.

*Keywords: house façade, Krakow town house, architectural detail*

#### Streszczenie

Na wygląd domu w mieście tradycyjnym ma wpływ wiele czynników m.in. przepisy budowlane, kształt i wielkość działek, warunki klimatyczne i lokalne, stosowane materiały i techniki budowlane. Tradycje kulturowe różnych regionów wyraźnie różnicują rozwiązania elementów architektonicznych kamienic, tworząc charakterystyczne, odmienne rozwiązania. Dzięki temu domy powiązane są z historią miast i zanurzone w bogatej tradycji miejscowych obrazów, materiałów i technik. Przykładem są kamienice krakowskie, które ewoluowały, zachowując strukturalno-architektoniczną istotę form i elementy charakterystyczne dla tradycji miejsca.

*Słowa kluczowe: elewacja kamienicy, kamienica krakowska, detal architektoniczny*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Façades play an important role in how the town houses in a traditional city are perceived; they are compared to a face (*facjata* – an informal synonym to the Polish equivalent of face). Unique details and the colour of elevations, as well as the materials used enable us to assign a specific country to the town house. Much like shape of eyes, skin colour or other characteristic features of face (*facjata*), they help us recognise a human face. Details in the houses' elevations in different regions represent characteristics pertinent to the climate; they are ingrained in the local tradition and history. Except for local conditions and climate, the way the houses look in a traditional city is also influenced, *inter alia*, by building laws, size and shape of the building plot, materials used, and building techniques, designer's skills, and the social stratification of the proprietors and the tenants.

They regulated, among others, the maximum height, the minimal distance between buildings and the minimal size of backyards. The irregular and untypical parcels created in a web of historic small-scale streets with buildings piling up had to be designed and built over in a rational and elastic manner. They were very often different from the model commonly used in other European towns at that time. The characteristic radial arrangement of streets starting from the Main Square caused the creation of numerous corner town houses, which contributed to the necessity of creating individual projects. The height and the size of the town houses and their elevations was connected with localization of the plot in a quarter building as well as the character of buildings in the neighbourhood. The form of the houses was also determined by local conditions such as topography, wastewater, etc. Building techniques also had a significant importance together with the material used, which often appeared in a neighbourhood or were typical of the historic buildings (brick, stone). The thickness of the walls influenced the characteristics of the detail, the articulation of the façade and the depth of shadows appearing on it.

Much like in Krakow, the cultural traditions from different regions differentiate the choices made for the town houses' architectural elements. They create characteristic and diverse solutions (the roof form, local materials) connected to the history of the cities. Thanks to this, the houses are rooted in a rich tradition of local views, materials and techniques. Parisian town houses from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are a great example, with their standardised elevations in light colour, which were very often made from a similar material. Other characteristic features were withdrawing the last storey and dormer roofs, conditioned by the building laws. Big French windows, ornamental portals and balconies with steel or cast-iron balustrades (placed very often on the first and the last storey, built over the full width of the façade) were a very typical detail.

Gold and white were very often used on elevations of the Viennese town houses from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, Saint Petersburg incorporates pink and yellow for their house elevations – a characteristic trademark of the town. Peter Carl Fabergé used these colours in his projects. In Italian towns, the colour of the town houses' elevations and roofs harmonises with the natural landscape and materials available in nature (the colour of the earth). The warm climate made it necessary to protect the windows with roller blinds or shutters. Their colour helped identifying which town the houses come from. Similarly, town house façades in Portugal, Spain and Mexico very often have a rich texture and their windows are

covered with blinds, protecting them from the sun. Balconies in houses from these regions have characteristic metal balustrades and their elevations are very often decorated with colourful ceramic tilep.

## 2. AN OUTLINE OF THE EVOLUTION OF KRAKOW TOWN HOUSE'S FAÇADES UNTIL THE END OF THE 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

Krakow's town houses evolved, maintaining the structural-architectural essence of their forms and the elements characteristic for the local tradition – among others – extended the eave connected with climate, roof's construction hidden behind a parapet, a highlighted and ring-fenced ground floor very often with an ornamental portal, typical materials (stone and brick) and a relatively small scale compared to other European cities.

These characteristic features of Krakow's town houses developed in a long-lasting tradition, dating back to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The first houses built in this period in Northern Europe had a similar model commonly used with slight modifications<sup>1</sup>. According to Adam Miłobędzki, they were characterised, inter alia, by "(...) marking out the main structural walls at the borders between the plots, which were grasping the transverse beams and, as a result of it, a certain consistency of the front elevation in respect of its technical, compositional, and sometimes also symbolic aspects<sup>2</sup>. In the second stage of construction conditioned by local influences, separate functional-spatial arrangements were introduced, "(...) essentially, however, a stylish evolution of the architectural forms took place in a somewhat surface layer and it did not project onto the basic typology and building structural systems"<sup>3</sup>. In the process of transformation, we can distinguish three fundamental steps that had a significant influence on the creation of a middle-class town house: technical (replacing wooden walls with brick or stone walls), functional and cultural (making storehouses "habitable"), and stylistic (absorbing the modern Italianising architectural arrangement). In time, one space house interior changed into a representative hallway, the storehouse expanded in the attic, first into an airy stock storey, later into a residential floor. The functional evolution of the town house's interior in Northern European countries was also reflected on the outside – "(...) a solid wall of a high residential ground floor contrasted on the elevation with a brittle screenlike floor of stock storey and with a parapet, which had numerous little openings. Later, the genetic primacy of the ground floor was only highlighted by the height of the windows. Except for that, the entire front with the top or the attic was treated as a smooth wall, if articulated – then evenly"<sup>4</sup>. This emphasis of the ground floor remained characteristic of the Krakow town house. The most similar to the Cracovian

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<sup>1</sup> M. Łukacz, *Pierwsze przemiany przestrzenne krakowskiej kamienicy mieszczańskiej w świetle jej związków z kamienicą Europy Północnej*, [in:] *Kamienica w krajach Europy Północnej*, edit. M.J. Sołtysik, Nadbałtyckie Centrum Kultury, Gdańsk 2004, p. 107, 112.

<sup>2</sup> A. Miłobędzki, *Mieszczański dom Europy Północnej – parę uwag o metodzie badania*, [in:] *Kamienica w krajach Europy Północnej, op.cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 94; A. Miłobędzki, *Architektura i „Architectura” w kulturze północnej Europy: 1550–1620*, *Rocznik Zakładu Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego „Porta Aurea”*, vol. II, Gdańsk 1993, p. 7–14.

model is the Silesian town house<sup>5</sup>, mainly Wrocławian<sup>6</sup>. They had a common genesis and numerous similar elements of development. The phenomenon of the early evolution of the Krakow town house also has an analogy in the history of development of town houses in other cities, especially in Northwest Europe<sup>7</sup>. The house-storehouse was first created in Northern Germany (in Hanseatic cities with Lübeck at the forefront). It filled the entire plot along the street and it comprised of a multifunctional single-space hallway (storing goods, workshop) with a hearth and wooden stairs. Above the hallway, in a gable roof, there were storerooms. In Krakow, the buildings usually had at least one residential floor.

At the beginning of the evolution of the Krakow town house, at the time of location in the year 1257, terraced buildings were incorporated into urban structure. It enabled an intense fulfilment of the plot's surface. Urban conditions such as size, form and location of the plot had a particular influence on this stage of development of the town house. The town houses were characterised by simplicity, monumentality, austerity and restrained decoration. The houses were not passable and did not have a basement (although they were built below the ground level)<sup>8</sup>. They were usually two-storeyed with most likely a gable roof or a hip roof (if the building did not adjoin another). They had large entrances and small windows on the ground floor. Rooms on the first floor were lit by usually two windows designed on both sides of a symmetrically located entrance to the building. Unfortunately, town houses from that period did not survive in their original shape and form. They were repeatedly reconstructed and, therefore, hidden in later built forms.

Town houses in the Main Square were usually three-storeyed, while in the neighbouring streets, two-storeyed buildings dominated. Attempts were made to standardise the height of the buildings. It was established that houses with a narrow front and a deep bay were covered with a gable roof, whereas houses with a wide front – with a doubled gable roof (it covered the saddle roofs) or peaked roof, closed with side brick gables<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately, in Krakow, none of the doubled gable remain. Roofs were most likely covered with shingle, and exceptionally with tiles. From saddle roofs, the water was piped using gutters made from hollow trunks with gargoyles sticking out of the building's edge. Field studies gathered some information pertaining to the territorial development; however, they found very little about roof forms and what the elevations looked like. Sadly, no images representing town houses were preserved in the earliest views of the Main Square<sup>10</sup>. Their façade walls underwent reconstructions in later stages of construction. However, some of the portals and windows have survived from that period. Since there are very few historical records concerning build-

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<sup>5</sup> J. Mitkowski, *Kraków lokacyjny*, [in:] *Kraków. Studia nad rozwojem miasta*, edit. J. Dąbrowski, Wyd. Literackie, Kraków 1957, p. 15, 130.

<sup>6</sup> T. Kozaczewski, *Murowane domy z XIII wieku we Wrocławiu*, [in:] *Architektura Wrocławia*, vol. 1: Dom, edit. J. Rozpędowski, Publ. Werk, Wrocław 1994, p. 9–50.

<sup>7</sup> W. Komorowski, *Kamienice i palace Rynku krakowskiego w średniowieczu*, *Rocznik Krakowski*, vol. LXVIII, 2002, p. 56, 69; W. Komorowski, *Kamienice krakowskie*, [in:] *Encyklopedia Krakowa*, edit. A.H. Stachowski, PWN, Warszawa 2000, p. 379.

<sup>8</sup> W. Komorowski, A. Sudacka, *Rynek Główny w Krakowie*, Ossolineum, Kraków 2008, p. 27, 76–77.

<sup>9</sup> J.S. Jamróz, *Mieszkańska kamienica krakowska, wiek XIII-XV*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków-Wrocław, 1983, p. 80, 84, 141–148, 162.

<sup>10</sup> J. Banach, *Najstarsza ikonografia Rynku Głównego*, *Rocznik Krakowski*, vol. 58, 1992, p. 71–89.

ings from the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> century, walls' opus and stylistic analysis of the architectural elements are extremely helpful in their dating.

The oldest town houses were built from a sorted broken limestone, whose layers were laid carefully. Brick was used mainly for lintels, window and door frames (alternatively to build floors). There are also numerous historical records of log houses or houses built in so-called Prussian wall on a stone basement. The elevations of gothic town houses were probably plain, crowned with sharp gable roofs with pinnacles segmented with niches, or with triangular gable divided by niches. Two types of stone portals remain from that period – ogival with big bevels in the corner and semi-circular with bevels and a big passage. There were also both already-mentioned types of portals, which were profiled. Window and door openings had only jambs – there were no embrasures. The oldest town houses were quickly expanded by adding more wings, as a result of which they were no longer homogeneous.

Codification of building laws, which were customary till that time, contributed to regulating the process of Krakow town house construction during the reign of Casimir III the Great (1333–1370)<sup>11</sup>. The form of the town house was a result of the function that it performed. It was usually one-storeyed, two-bay and it occupied half of the plot. On the other half of the plot, there were utility rooms, including a rear outbuilding connected with the main building by galleries suspended on the border walls (side outbuildings were a rarity in mediaeval times)<sup>12</sup>. The arrangement of the interiors was designed by following a commonly established model. It was performed regardless of the material (stone, wood) and the proprietor's social status. Some differences in burghers' wealth were visible in the architectural scale (number of storeys), the artistic quality of decorations and material, as well as standard of furnishings. Nonadherence to typical models were a rarity, they were a result of the unusual shape of the plot, its location, and the different functions of the buildings.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the way elevations looked changed. They came to be more openwork due to the introduction of bigger, tripartite windows. Their jambs were lavishly decorated with tracery. Similarly as it was in other parts of Poland, brick façades could have been covered with polychromies, consisting of plaster covered with red paint with white joints. Stone walls were most likely painted with one layer of thoroughly smoothed plaster, very often dyed (usually red). A web of joints resembling the arrangement of stone blocks was painted on it. The web of joints was painted very strictly, even when it did not necessarily match their actual arrangement<sup>13</sup>. Unpainted walls remained there where ornamentally arranged bricks with an interesting texture were used. Colourful polychromies were also probably used to cover the characteristic elements of a façade like cornices, wimpergs, pilasters and niches. Painting stone in the Renaissance was a continuation of mediaeval traditions. Besides the decorative role of the paint, it also protected the material from patination and erosion. Windows divided by stone columns were usually glazed with crown glass.

From the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Krakow underwent a period of transformations of the late-gothic form. Under the influence of the Italian humanistic ideal, renaissance de-

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<sup>11</sup> Among others so-called "wilkierz" from the year 1367, which established the way of border walls' construction.

<sup>12</sup> W. Komorowski, *Kamienice krakowskie...*, *op.cit.*, p. 380.

<sup>13</sup> M. Arszczyński, *O problemach kolorystyki fasad*, *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu M. Kopernika w Toruniu*, issue XVI, 1966, p. 151–158.

tails and ornaments were used to decorate the brick façades of palaces and town houses<sup>14</sup>. In that period, new brick town houses were built in Krakow with rich masonry details and interiors lit by wide windows. The elite of Krakow, to pattern themselves on the king, hired masters who built according to the Italian fashion. They created a characteristic language of late-gothic and early-renaissance forms and details – portals and window frameworks (so-called “długoszowskie”) with lintels with set-off bays with, initially not intersecting and then, in the Renaissance, intersecting in the corners rich profiling that could be inscribed in a rectangle. Also the cornices enriching the façades were adopted from Italian art, with Antique-inspired ornaments (oeil-de-boeufs, cobble and gems). Initially, it was Renaissance decoration used on Late Gothic forms. In time, some houses were characterised by a modern arrangement of space, expressed by alignment, regularity of composition and spaciousness of interiors. Characteristic elements of the middle-class town houses in that period were the parapet (inspired by that of the Krakow Cloth Hall) and cloisters (continuing the tradition of Wawel’s courtyard) connecting the main building to the outbuildings.

Worsening economic conditions<sup>15</sup>, diseases, numerous earlier fires, floods and the Polish-Swedish war in the years 1655–1657 were reasons for Krakow’s gradual fall and depopulation. Many houses were then destroyed and burned. Due to lack of resources, townsmen did not build new town houses but restored the old ones instead, adding the angled buttresses characteristic of that period. The modernisations had a purely pragmatic character and did not show any innovation. Builders used trusted models from an earlier period. Façades were also modified to adjust them to different style trends. Rococo forms of decorating portals and window frames contrasted to the plane design of elevations. Baroque forms coexisted with early-classicist ones. Architectural divisions, the so-called classical order (designed on two storeys), were also introduced. They were patterned upon treatises from the 16<sup>th</sup>-century theoretician Andrea Palladio. Starting in the final quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, column-supported gallery-balconies were being introduced, designed most often on palace façades. Another characteristic detail were portals with aslant pilasters and sculptural pediments, inspired by Viennese, Praguian and Silesian<sup>16</sup> examples. Modern parapets coexisted with numerous parapets of a new type with not very high balustrades with panels.

There was an improvement in architecture in Krakow between 1796 and 1809 thanks to the Austrians, who supported the development of industry and trade. In accordance with a resolution from 15<sup>th</sup> December 1818, only brick houses were built, while wooden houses<sup>17</sup> were not allowed to be renovated. Even in the suburbs, there were two-storeyed town houses being built using incombustible materials<sup>18</sup>. Town house elevations were designed in a classicist style with symmetrical gables. Balconies with cast-iron balustrades on the first floors

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<sup>14</sup> B. Krasnowolski, *Krakowskie warsztaty budowlane i kamieniarskie na przełomie średniowiecza i nowożytności*, Rocznik Krakowski, vol. LXXII, 2006, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> D. Rederowa, *Lata upadku (od połowy wieku XVII do r. 1775)*, [in:] *Kraków. Studia nad rozwojem miasta*, edit. J. Dąbrowski, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1957, p. 229–241.

<sup>16</sup> W. Komorowski, A. Sudacka, *Rynek Główny w Krakowie*, *op.cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> D. Rederowa, *Powstanie Krakowa nowożytnego(1775–1867)*, [in:] *Kraków. Studia nad rozwojem miasta*, edit. J. Dąbrowski, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1957, p. 274.

<sup>18</sup> S. Kawecki, *Opis miasta Krakowa w obrębie okopów w r. 1836*, Publ. A. Chmiel, Biblioteka Krakowska, no 65, Kraków 1927, p. 46.

were a novelty. The 1940's and the 1950's in Krakow's architecture were a time of transition from Late Classicism and Romantic eclecticism (which dominated in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), into fully developed Historicism<sup>19</sup>.

A city fire in 1850 enforced the restoration of many houses. Many impressive town houses were then built, very often with a neo-renaissance decoration. New materials and new building techniques were used to build them. Town house elevations from the years 1857 to 1867 are characterised by a small number of decorations and clear composition with rhythmic windows. Their ground floor was very often separated by a distinctly underlined cornice. Rich framing above windows was no longer used. Moreover, pilasters designed in great order were also rarely used. It happened that they highlighted the corners or the middle section of the elevation. Façades mostly had rectangular openings; however, on the ground floor they were usually segmental or semi-circular. Last storey walls with attic windows, which were located mainly on the level of the entablature's frieze (reference to the historical parapet), were characteristic then. Around 1870, the area of town houses increased, which affected the artistic expression and size of façades. Their compositions were characterised by regularity and minimalism of form.

### 3. SUMMARY

Krakow town house façades changed much like the aesthetic canons. This process was characterised by continuing the local tradition, as well as creative using and adjusting of foreign models to local conditions. Individually designed elevations with characteristic details enabled residents' identification of a place located in a specific district.

The evolution of façades did not always occur in parallel and in the same manner as interior changes. Town houses from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were left unchanged from outside, sooner or later were more and more modernised indoors. Two spaces of a house in a traditional city are its two faces – a public one (sometimes pretending to be something more, following a tradition) and a private one (more real, individual and sometimes much more modern). In this binomial of outdoors and indoors, the latter "(...) plays a dominant, active role as a centre of our experience"<sup>20</sup>. According to Peter Zumthor, it is the frame and the background of our passing life<sup>21</sup>. Whether or not the lasting and changeless elements remain indoors depends, to a great extent, on residents' attitude towards tradition and innovation.

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<sup>19</sup> Z.J. Białkiewicz, *Przemiany architektury krakowskiej w połowie XIX wieku*, Monograph no 176, Publ. Cracow University of Technology, Kraków 1994, p. 4–5.

<sup>20</sup> A. Moravánszky, *Postrzeganie przestrzeni*, Autoportret 2/2013, Publ. Małopolski Instytut Kultury, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Kraków, Karakter, 2010, p. 10.

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