

Translation from Polish of the article “Czy Kraków będzie drugim Kioto?” published in the Krakow edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 10, 2006

Footnotes have been added to the English translation



Contemporary panorama of Kyoto

## Is Krakow going to be another Kyoto?

Andrzej Jajszczyk

**We dreamed about the “second Japan<sup>1</sup>”, about a wonderful country from which a lot can be learned. But probably we do not want our Krakow to be another Kyoto, i.e., a city whose charm was irreversibly destroyed within last sixty years.**

No other city in Poland has as strong links with Japan as Krakow. Here, many years ago, Krystyna Zachwatowicz and Andrzej Wajda created the Kyoto-Krakow Foundation. Andrzej Wajda donated the money associated with his prestigious Kyoto Award to build the “Manggha” Center of Japanese Art and Technology. The beautiful building of the center was designed by Arata Isozaki, a famous Japanese architect, who matched it perfectly to the bank of the river and the view on the Debniki quarter seen from the Wawel Castle. This Japanese architect is one of those many foreign designers and artists who created their masterpieces in Krakow. The role of architects from abroad in this city cannot be overestimated. I can mention that St. Mary’s church was designed by a German from Prague, the renaissance part of Wawel was created by an Italian, St. Anne church by a Dutch architect, and the Arsenal building was adapted as Czartoryski Library by a French. Many more examples can be given.

The “Manggha” center was built mainly because of the presence in our city of a magnificent collection of Japanese art collected in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Feliks Jasienski (nicknamed “Manggha”) and then donated to the National Museum of Krakow. However, the center does not only mean presentation of the Jasienski’s collection to

---

<sup>1</sup> Refers to a statement of Lech Walesa who in one of his speeches, in 1981, said: “we will build a second Japan in Poland!”

visitors. The center offers also a wide range of artistic, educational, and scholarly activities, considerably exceeding only Japan-related topics. These activities form people open to other cultures and facilitate seeing us ourselves in the proper perspective. Teaching of Japanese in a school associated with the center, without doubts, will facilitate mutual contacts between our countries, not only in the area of culture, but most of all, in economy. Experiences of Japan, the second richest country of the world, can be to us of a value that cannot be overestimated. This relates to experiences both positive and negative. The second, fearsome, group, includes the development of Kyoto, the city so reminding Krakow along its history.

### Similarities

Similarities between Krakow and Kyoto are simply striking. Both are old country capitals, and now the third, according to population, cities of the respective countries. Wawel and the Imperial Palace are the most important buildings of those ancient capitals. Both Krakow and Kyoto are well known university cities as well as centers of culture and art. Their numerous and magnificent temples, along with other architectural masterpieces, as well as parks and gardens are subject to admiration. Both cities are on the UNESCO world heritage list. Both miraculously escaped bombing disasters of World War II, while the majority of other cities in Poland and Japan were not as lucky.



Kyoto is still a city of historical monuments

Kyoto and Krakow, in their early history, were subjects to solid urban planning. Both cities are located in wide valleys surrounded by hills, and both were planned with an amazing vision, using foreign, but proven formulas. In the case of Kyoto, Japanese emperor Kammu based its urban plan on the Chinese city of Chang'an (now Xi'an), and Krakow, in times of king Boleslaw The Bashful was planned (the so-called Great Location<sup>2</sup>) using urban experiences of German cities. In both cases, the foreign patterns were not simply copied but, instead, great forward looking visions were created. The fact that both cities were their countries capitals for several centuries resulted in many beautiful and valuable buildings. Paradoxically, loss of importance by Kyoto and Krakow, especially in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, allowed to preserve their historical substance in the period when the rapid development of economies has led to extensive remodeling of many cities worldwide.

After WWII the development of both cities took different paths. The downtown of Krakow preserved its historical charm, partly because the communist rulers concentrated on the construction of Nowa Huta<sup>3</sup>. Some role was also played by the resistance of educated, opinion-setting circles of the society against too far reaching intervention into the structure of the city. However, some disasters were not avoided, as, for example, the hopeless location of Leg power station, spoiling one of the best Krakow's panoramas, or construction of the skeleton of a skyscraper at Mogilskie crossing. The Heroes of Ghetto square or a view from Blonia<sup>4</sup> into the Old City were also destroyed by placing buildings that were too high and not matching their neighbors. The "Podwawelskie" residential area was another mistake, as its height competes with the Royal Castle.

---

<sup>2</sup> The location of the city according to the Magdeburg law in 1257.

<sup>3</sup> Nowa Huta, literally *The New Steel Mill*, is the easternmost district of Krakow, built after WWII as a satellite industrial town to "correct the class imbalance" by attracting people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to the region, such as peasants and the working class.

<sup>4</sup> A 48 ha meadow in the middle of the city.

## **Kyoto**

Kyoto had less luck. Here, the belief in the “natural ownership rights”, wrongly understood progress, greed, and lack of vision within the city authorities and city council have led to virtual covering of the city centre with concrete. Among ugly, huge buildings shaping the city skyline, we can find jewels of Buddhist and Shinto temples and shrines as well as what was left of parks and gardens. Although these historical monuments still attract tourists, their number could be multiplied if the central part of the city maintained its historical character. This is well illustrated by citations from American guidebooks: “Kyoto is a contemporary metropolis with a full share of Japanese urban ugliness... During WWII Americans believed that Kyoto is too beautiful to destroy it, but this did not stop the Japanese. We imagine Florence of the East, but instead Kyoto (...) has so much charm as an urban public garage”. This is only a small selection of opinions. Alex Kerr in his book about Japan entitled “Dogs and Demons<sup>5</sup>” is even more straightforward.

## **The wrong path**

Unfortunately, it seems that Krakow is going to follow the same path. The complex of Norbertanki monastery is gradually sliding to the state in which it will remind Japanese shrines wedged between gigantic, concrete based, buildings. Two huge complexes of apartment buildings are to be constructed just opposite the Wawel Castle. The buildings, on the site of the existing so far Forum hotel, designed in the DDJM studio are to be of twelve floors high and their scale will completely overwhelm the Wawel Hill. The Ludwinow residential area, planned in the vicinity, along with its huge scale, strikes us by its ugliness. We even start to miss the plan for Debniki redevelopment, which was to enhance the beauty of the Wawel Castle, prepared by Hubert Ritter and ordered by the Nazis! (I would like to remind here the sentence on Americans and Germans in the context of spoiling Kyoto, cited above). The investors of the “skeleton” at Mogilskie crossing are speaking about “adding a few floors”, suggesting that this structure would be a new masterpiece of architecture.

I am not against contemporary skyscrapers, for example the “Turning Torso” by Santiago Calatrava in Malmoe, or skyscrapers in Hong Kong. But let us keep the old center of Krakow as is! The multitude of tourists visiting our city do not come here to enjoy contemporary architecture (although that of high quality is scarce) but to breathe in the historical atmosphere of Krakow. If it is destroyed, the foundation of financial existence of the thousands living on the visitors will be undermined. First of all, however, this will deprive us of the joy of living within something so magnificent. Do not trick ourselves — individual historical monuments of Krakow, maybe with the exception of Wawel, are not very special. Hundreds of similar and more valuable monuments can be found in cities of Italy, Spain, France, or Germany. The fulfillment of the investment plans mentioned above will redirect tourists to other locations. Even yuppies from Warsaw will stop their weekend trips to Krakow’s restaurants, since they are attracted here not only by the quality of dishes and low prices of beverages.

Protests against construction activities spoiling the character of Krakow’s center are immediately responded by greedy developers and architects. Arguments on turning Krakow into a backward village, aversion towards the contemporary architecture, or even on fulfilling the dreams of young people about their own apartment are routinely used. The last argument, taking into account the pricing of the mentioned apartments reaching 15000 zloty per square meter, I will leave without any comment. As the argument about turning Krakow into a

---

<sup>5</sup> Alex Kerr, *Dogs and Demons: Tales from the Dark Side of Japan*, Hill & Wang Pub, 2001

primitive village is concerned, the situation, in my opinion, is clear. Let us create in Krakow some modern, magnificent architecture — we have lots of space beyond the very center of the city. Do not lose such opportunities as we had, for example, with careful planning of Kapelanka street and others, which, instead, were covered with randomly placed buildings of a doubtful quality. Why Mateczny and Mogilskie roundabouts cannot be surrounded by good and well matching buildings as in the case of Paris, but instead seem as an architectural garbage? Can anybody say that Florence or Paris are primitive villages? But their panoramas were not destroyed. In Paris, with an exception of the Monparnasse tower build in early 1970-ties, skyscrapers are concentrated on its edges, on a excellently drafted axis, in La Défense. What prevents us to place such an area in, for example, Czyzyny? But leave the Old City, Blonia, and the Kosciusko Mound alone! I would not be even against apartment buildings opposite the Wawel Castle — but let their scale not to overwhelm the castle, and let them be designed by the best architects selected in an international competition. I know that I cannot request this from the developers, but what is the purpose of the City Council and the City Management Board?

Simultaneously with the development of new urban plans, it would be necessary to stop now any possibility to destroy the most valuable areas of Krakow. I cannot believe that this is impossible. I am not also able to understand why in the entire post-war history of our city it was not possible to execute any legal rulings on demolishing buildings constructed without permission. I would also dream about creation of a special municipal fund used for purchasing and demolition of objects spoiling the Krakow's character the most. Such long term activities are always beneficial.

\*Andrzej Jajszczyk is a Professor at the Department of Telecommunications, AGH University of Science and Technology, Krakow, Poland. He also serves as Vice-president of the Board of Kyoto-Krakow Foundation.

*Translated from Polish by the author.*

Polish version available at: <http://www.klubkrakowski.pl/czlonkowie/42/jajszczyk-andrzej.html>