URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORY. HISTORIC DISTRICTS AS OBJECTS OF CONSERVATION IN SOCIALIST POLAND (1945–1980)

Mikołaj Getka-Kenig

Abstract
The history of conservation in post-war Poland was characterised by a number of spectacular undertakings in the field of rebuilding and restoring historic districts. The social and economic factors that enabled such large-scale interventions provided the socialist state with an opportunity to shape a more general vision of local and national history. Historic districts provide important material testimony of not only urban history but also its social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. Architectural and urban modifications in such specific spaces influenced the way in which the past was (or was expected to be) seen at that time, with the intention of explaining and justifying the present, namely socialist rule in Poland. Although the socialist regime was based on an ideology of progress and revolution, it also apparently needed to be grounded in history to secure its legitimacy. This was also consistent with the fundamental assumption of Marxist philosophy of history, according to which socialism was the result of a centuries-old teleological historical process. This chapter analyses various examples of interventions in Poland's urban heritage between the late 1940s and the 1970s. In particular, it shows how the development of the state's policy towards historic districts (and thus also the changing character of the interventions) reflected the political evolution of the socialist regime itself. The chapter is divided into three sections, aside from the introduction and the conclusion. The first is dedicated to the pre-war situation, the second part focuses on reconstructions of historic districts in Warsaw, Gdańsk, and Poznań, while the third section deals with the restoration of preserved historic districts in Kraków, Toruń, and Sandomierz.

Keywords
Historic district, urban history, politics of history, socialist realism, modernism, Polish People's Republic

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter argues that the conservation of historic districts in post-war socialist Poland was an instrument of the regime's politics of history. The term "politics of history" as used in this chapter refers to the practice of controlling and organising the collective vision of the (often very distant) past by the state at both central and regional (or local) levels. According to the Polish political scientist, Rafał Chwedoruk, the politics of history has many uses, including the legitimisation of political power, the creation of communal identity, and social integration (Chwedoruk, 2018, p. 327). Architectural monuments are

https://doi.org/10.34727/2025/isbn.978-3-85448-077-8_6

conveyers of historical meanings. Therefore, their public protection (as much as their intentional destruction) is not neutral from the perspective of the politics of history. This is also the case for historic districts. They provide important testimony not only of urban history but also of its social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. In the history of conservation in Poland, the period between the late 1940s and the 1970s was characterised by a number of spectacular efforts of post-war reconstruction and restoration of historic districts. The legitimacy of socialist regimes was founded primarily on criticism of capitalist socio-economic relations, which were expected to be changed through large-scale modernisation projects such as industrialisation, secularisation, property redistribution, and nationalisation. However, the cultural and built heritage of previous centuries also proved to be an important area of interest for the socialist authorities, since their popular legitimacy apparently required some degree of historical grounding. This was also consistent with the fundamental assumption of the Marxist philosophy of history, according to which socialism was the result of a centuries-old teleological historical process (a general discussion of the attitude of socialist regimes towards the past was provided by Geering & Vickers, 2022, pp. 4–10; Geering, 2022, pp. 223–228). This chapter therefore pays special attention to historic districts because of their specific status as (collective) monuments, bringing together a range of architectural and non-architectural components to form a more or less coherent, historically significant whole.

This chapter does not attempt to outline the general history of the socialist state's conservation policy towards historic districts but is an analysis of this specific aspect of policy. Methodologically, it combines political history with critical heritage studies, paying attention to the phenomenon of the ideologically motivated "creation" of heritage through its reconstruction or renovation. My study is inspired primarily by two monographs written in Polish: *Ideologia i konserwacja. Architektura zabytkowa w Polsce w czasach socrealizmu* (Ideology and Conservation. Historic architecture in Poland in the times of socialist realism) by historian Piotr Majewski (2009), and *Odbudowa Głównego Miasta w Gdansku w latach 1945–1960* (Reconstruction of the Main City in Gdańsk in the years 1945–1960) by art historian Jacek Friedrich (2015). Majewski was the first to highlight (mainly through extensive source quotations) the scope of political involvement of the highest socialist authorities in the reconstruction of Warsaw's monuments (including Old Town). For his part, Friedrich was the first to explore the ideological dimension of the architectural and artistic design of the rebuilt Main Town (or Main City) in Gdańsk, as well as the symbolic role of modernist architecture's incorporation into this space in the last phase of the reconstruction process.

In my contribution, I compare the above-mentioned cases of Warsaw and Gdańsk with other characteristic examples of districts whose rebuilding or renovation served the socialist politics of history. The cases I have chosen to focus on reveal various aspects of the problem under examination and represent different ways in which the state has used historic districts to create visions of the past through architecture and urban planning at various levels of state administration. The chapter consists of three sections, apart from the introduction and the conclusion. The first concerns the pre-war (pre-socialist)

period. It was then that the idea of bringing historic districts (and not only individual monuments) under the protection of the state emerged. However, the authorities' actions in this field were very limited, mainly for socio-economic reasons (apparently due to the primacy of private property, limiting the state's freedom to shape urban space). The chapter aims primarily to prove how drastically the situation changed after the war.

The following two sections are devoted to the analysis of specific examples of interventions aimed at reframing the urban past in accordance with the post-war regime's needs. The second part concerns cases of reconstruction of historic districts that occurred mainly during the Stalinist period (late 1940s to mid-50s). This was also the period of the official ideology of socialist realism that legitimised the practice of historically informed rebuilding of destroyed cities. The reconstruction of Old Town in Warsaw and its environs is an example of how the socialist authorities treated the rebuilt heritage as a symbolic illustration of the genealogy of socialist urban planning. The development of Main Town and Old Town in Gdańsk draws our attention to the problem of harnessing urban planning in the service of the Polonisation of former German areas (incorporated into Poland after the war, but with a long record of belonging to the Polish state in the distant past). In turn, Old Town in Poznań is an example of how, through relatively small but conspicuous interventions in a historically informed reconstructed space, it was possible to emphasise the connection between heritage and modernity in post-Stalinist realities.

The third and final section presents ideologically motivated examples of the renovation of historic districts that survived the war without large-scale architectural losses. During the first post-war decade, the government focused on the rebuilding of destroyed cities; it therefore paid little attention to the maintenance of such areas. However, the situation changed in the late 1950s, when rising appreciation of the preserved heritage coincided with the fall of the Stalinist regime and the state's retreat from the ideology of socialist realism. However, this period saw new opportunities emerge within the socialist politics of history, which was still an important source of legitimacy for the government. This was manifested most clearly in the celebrations of the millennium of the Polish state between 1959 and 1966, which provided the incentive for many renovation programmes of historic districts. I discuss the case of Old Town in Krakow, whose restoration started in the 1960s, apparently motivated by the regime's longing for international recognition in the post-Stalinist period. By contrast, the conservation of Old Town in Toruń was a post-Stalinist example of the longstanding fight against German heritage. Finally, the case of Old Town in provincial Sandomierz shows how it was possible to "improve" not only local but also national history through minor alterations of the town's historic space.

2 THE PRE-SOCIALIST SITUATION

The conservation and revitalisation of historic districts emerged as key elements of the Polish state's conservation policy only in the aftermath of the Second World War, the end of which also led to the rise of the socialist regime. Before 1939, Poland's public policies on the conservation of monuments were focused mainly on individual buildings. It is true, however, that in the interwar period, many conservators, art historians, and architects started to look at monuments from a broader urban perspective, building the foundations from which the post-war theory and practice of conservation would evolve (the so-called Polish School of Monument Conservation). Some of them, like conservator Jan Zachwatowicz and art historian Stanisław Lorentz, were also able to play leading roles in this post-war development (Dettloff, 2006, pp.130–140). However, their emerging concern for this kind of approach had a rather limited impact on the actions of the state – both the central government and local authorities.

The monument protection ordinance of 1928, issued by Poland's president addressed this topic to a very limited extent, taking into account only "the preserved urban layouts of old cities and old town districts"[1] as subjects of protection (Dziennik Ustaw, 1928, p. 538). Although the term "old town district" occurred here, it was used only once and was not defined. Only in 1936 did the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Enlightenment issue instructions for the "protection of the character of old towns and old town districts", although this document was at the lower end of the hierarchy of legal acts (Dettloff, 2006, pp. 132–133). It seems that the development of the concept of "historic districts" as objects of state protection was hindered primarily by the reluctance of public administrative organs (both central and local) to interfere with private (and ecclesiastical) property (on the case of Warsaw, see: Popiołek-Roßkamp, 2021, pp. 111–114). Privately owned buildings predominated in the oldest and most historically significant areas of Polish cities. It was therefore a rare initiative in the field when an open competition was organised by the City Board (*zarząd miejski*) of Kraków in 1937, inviting urbanists to submit their designs for "ordering" (*uporządkowanie*) the space of former market squares within the city's medieval core. By "ordering", the local authorities understood the reorganisation of pedestrian and vehicular movement in the area, the choice of the squares' individual functions, the design and choice of materials for their surface, the refashioning of tenement house façades facing the squares, the method of illumination, and the placement of advertising columns, newsstands, memorials, and water handpumps. However, the competition ended without a winner, and due to the subsequent outbreak of the Second World War, the idea of "ordering" this area was never implemented (Zarząd Miejski w Krakowie, 1937, pp. 74–82; Dettloff, 2006, p. 134). Local authorities also initiated renovation programmes in such cities and towns as Warsaw (1928–1929), Zamość (1934–1937), and Lublin (1936–1938). They were focused on the restoration of tenement house façades that faced main market squares in those cities. Such programmes were partly funded by the central government (Dettloff, 2006, pp. 318–325).

1 Unless otherwise stated, this and all subsequent translations from non-English-language sources are by the author.

3 REBUILDING DESTROYED HISTORIC DISTRICTS

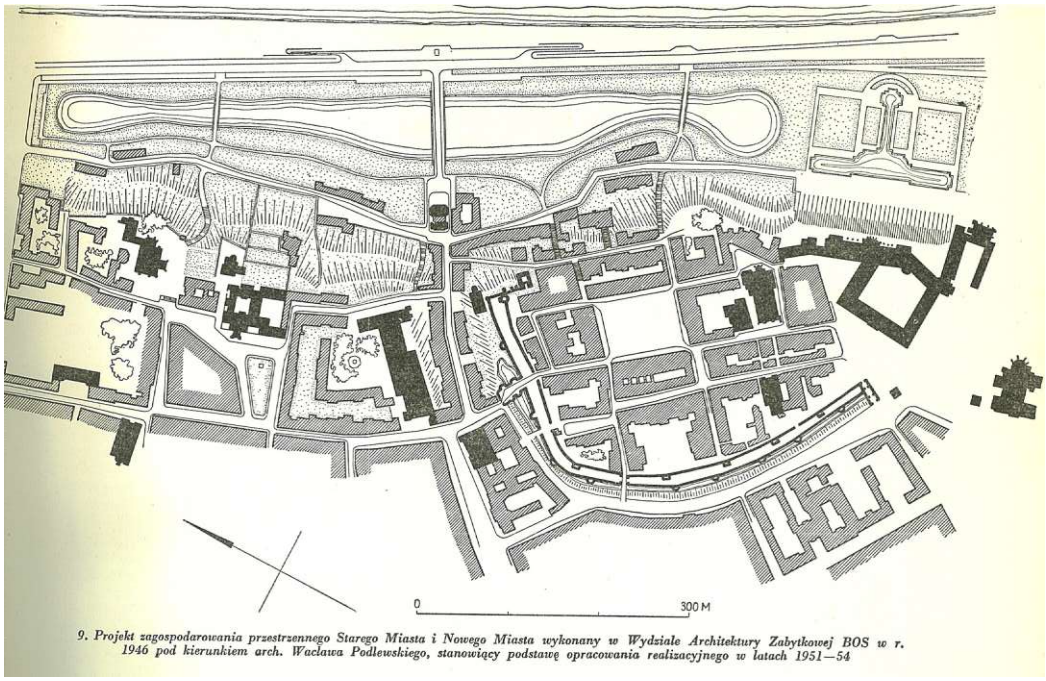
Many Polish cities and towns were severely damaged in the Second World War. This was true not only in the case of territory that had belonged to Poland before the war but also in the former German provinces annexed to Poland in 1945 (including Silesia, Pomerania, and Masuria). The idea of faithful reconstruction of historic architecture (including individual buildings of particular value) originally came from conservators. It was primarily Jan Zachwatowicz, the first post-war general conservator of monuments, who championed this fairly innovative idea, which was at variance with the pre-war practice and theory of architectural conservation. It challenged the principles of the Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments of 1931.

Before the war, Zachwatowicz had authored the first conservation plan for the historic centre of Zamość and conducted works on the rebuilding of the medieval walls of Warsaw's Old Town (Dettloff, 2006, pp. 134, 322). In his post-war view, the reconstruction of historic architecture should be a symbol of the defeat of Nazi Germany. Although the war deprived Poles of much of their built heritage, the socialist state was expected to give it back to them. The political authorities accepted this argument, additionally arguing that the history of architecture was in fact the heritage of ordinary people such as builders, bricklayers, and carpenters, and not only of the rich and powerful (Majewski, 2009, pp. 298, 315–316). However, the mass destruction confronted the socialist authorities with the problem of adapting not only individual buildings but also entire districts to modern uses. The reconstruction of historic areas offered an opportunity for more or less spectacular architectural and urban interventions that affected their general appearance. The emergent new vision of the urban past, as communicated through architecture, could serve to legitimise modernity in the social, economic, and political dimensions. The reconstructed historic districts were to constitute an integral element of the contemporary urban fabric, representing the past and showing how it paved the way to modernity. Note that the socialist government had rather little respect for private property, limiting the freedom of private owners to administer and control their buildings. The Demolition and Repair Decree of 1945 already facilitated the state appropriation of private properties that required reconstruction or restoration after the war (Dziennik Ustaw, 1945b, pp. 437–438). This approach was later affirmed also by the Renovation and Reconstruction Act of 1959 (Dziennik Ustaw, 1959, pp. 377–379). In the case of Warsaw, all land was appropriated by the state and transferred to the local municipality as a result of what became known as the "Bierut Decree" of 1945 (Dziennik Ustaw, 1945a, pp. 434–435; Bazyler et al., 2019, p. 327).

3.1 Warsaw – the genealogy of socialist urban planning

The most important undertaking of this sort was the reconstruction of "Old Town" (*Stare Miasto*) in Warsaw, Poland's capital. This relatively small area (around ten hectares) was the medieval nucleus of the city, situated within the medieval walls, centred around a market square, and visually dominated by

early modern, mostly 16th and 17th century tenement houses and three churches. Before the war, Warsaw's Old Town was overpopulated and generally quite impoverished, despite the efforts of the city's administration to encourage tourism (Dettloff, 2008, pp. 321–322; Popiołek-Roßkamp, 2021, pp. 193–198). It was damaged in 1939 and suffered massive destruction in 1944. The socialist government already decided to rebuild it in 1945, but the actual work took place between 1947 and 1953. Note that the rebuilt Old Town was not to be an open-air museum but a modern housing estate, meeting all the necessary features of socialist urban planning and residential architecture. The Office for the Reconstruction of the Capital (*Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy*), which was established to manage the process of rebuilding Warsaw, planned to reconstruct Old Town's historic façades and street layout, restoring all the advantages of its spatial and artistic character "from the best periods" in its history (Majewski, 2009, 193). By "best periods", they apparently meant the medieval and early modern eras, predating the "capitalist" interventions of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Such an approach invited consideration of how such far-reaching changes would affect the heritage of less favoured periods. The socialist authorities, including official urban designers and architects, appreciated Warsaw's Old Town primarily as evidence of Poland's urban planning traditions, from which modern socialist cities could trace their roots. In particular, it was the spatial arrangement built around an axis running from Castle Square (*Plac Zamkowy*) through Old Town Market Square (*Rynek Starego Miasta*) and further through Freta Street to New Town Market Square (*Rynek Nowego Miasta*) that attracted their recognition (Figure 1). The axis



9. Projekt zagospodarowania przestrzennego Starego Miasta i Nowego Miasta wykonany w Wydziale Architektury Zabytkowej BOS w r. 1946 pod kierunkiem arch. Wacława Podlewskiego, stanowiący podstawę opracowania realizacyjnego w latach 1951—54

FIGURE 1 Plan of Warsaw's Old Town and New Town as housing estates. Buildings in black (castle, churches, and town walls) indicate non-residential function. (From Biegański, 1956, p. 11, CC BY)

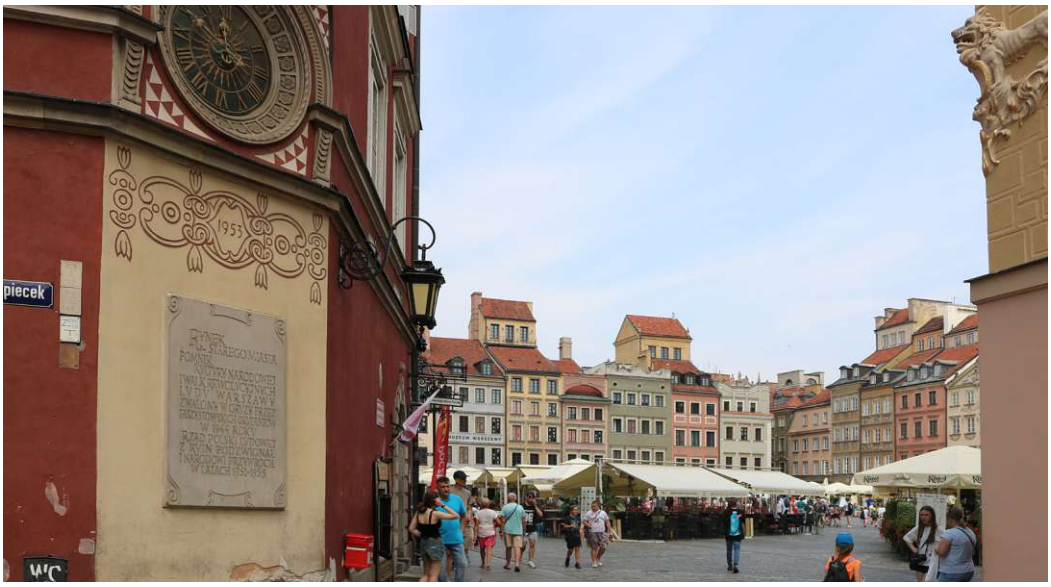


FIGURE 2 Market Square in Warsaw's Old Town; the plaque mentions the site's revolutionary traditions. (Photo: M. Getka-Kenig, 2024, CC BY-SA)

was called the Old Warsaw Route (*Trakt Starej Warszawy*) (Majewski, 2009, pp. 197–198). A subsidiary – socio-historical – argument in favour of the reconstruction was that Warsaw's Old Town had been a working-class district during the long 19th century and was particularly susceptible to revolutionary upheavals. In 1953, the government unveiled a commemorative plaque mentioning this fact at Market Square (Figure 2) (Jaworska & Kietlicz-Wojnacki, 1956, p. 178; see also: Kieniewicz, 1982, pp. 75–82).

However, the central authorities had no interest in restoring historic elements that were considered to disturb this urban ideal. For instance, they did not allow the reconstruction of the town hall, which had stood in the middle of Old Town Market Square until the early 19th century (the beginning of the despised "capitalist" era). If the town hall had been rebuilt, this relatively small square would have lost its potential as a venue for political rallies. Open public squares were a key element of socialist urban planning, providing space for controlled mass demonstrations. Józef Sigalin, a vice chairman of the Office for the Reconstruction of the Capital, suggested even leaving one side of Old Town Market Square without houses and increasing its capacity by building an amphitheatre. But his idea turned out to be too radical for the socialist authorities (Majewski, 2009, p. 195).

Another example of government intervention was the refusal to fully reconstruct the medieval walls of Old Town. Their reconstruction was originally planned by Warsaw's municipality and even partly executed by Zachwatowicz in the pre-war period, after centuries of degradation and the reuse of structures as elements of tenement houses. It was apparently Zachwatowicz's ambition to continue this project, and the idea of Old Town's post-war reconstruction provided him with an ideal opportunity. The walls, however, would have separated Old Town from the rest of Warsaw, which was contrary to the adopted vision of the rebuilt city as a coherent organic space without isolated enclaves. Consequently, the walls were only partially reconstructed (especially

FIGURE 3 The “House under Christ” in Warsaw’s Old Town. (Photo: M. Getka-Kenig, 2024, CC BY-SA)

their lower parts), and the area was planted with trees and bushes as a recreational space, enabling a relatively seamless connection with the surrounding areas (Majewski, 2008, pp. 201–202; Popiołek-Roßkamp, 2021, pp. 227–235). The presence of churches was also problematic for the authorities, although all three of them were ultimately reconstructed between 1947 and 1959 (Lewicka, 1992, pp. 124, 133, 140). Initially, however, the leaders of the socialist party wanted St. Martin’s Church in Piwna Street to serve as a museum of the history of medieval art (despite the fact that it was a Baroque building, although it did retain elements of its Gothic precursor) rather than a place for public worship (Sigalin, 1986, p. 323). The cathedral, formerly in the English neo-Gothic style (a result of its mid-19th century rebuilding by Adam Idźkowski), acquired a completely new façade. This was inspired by the medieval ecclesiastical architecture of the region of Masovia (the environs of Warsaw), characterised by red brick, squat proportions, and simple decoration. It seems, however, that it was drawn up by Zachwatowicz himself (there were no reliable sources visually documenting the cathedral’s appearance before its neo-Gothic rebuilding), in consultation with church leaders, rather than the outcome of government pressure (Majewski, 2008, pp. 200–201; Popiołek-Roßkamp, 2021, pp. 263–269). The authorities apparently had less tolerance for the religious decoration of secular buildings. For instance, the “House under Christ” tenement (*kamienica pod Chrystusem*) was rebuilt without its eponymous statue of the Resurrected Christ, which had crowned its façade since the 18th century (Majewski & Markiewicz, 1998, pp. 135–138) (Figure 3).

Despite these politically inspired interventions, Warsaw’s rebuilt Old Town managed to gain international recognition among conservators and heritage experts. It was even included on the UNESCO World Heritage List as early as 1980, having already been initially considered for inscription two years earlier, when the original list of World Heritage Sites was being composed (Röttjer, 2022, p. 65). UNESCO valued Warsaw’s Old Town as “an exceptional example of the global reconstruction of a sequence of history running from the 13th to the 20th centuries”, especially stressing its “correspondence” with Criterion No. 6 of the World Heritage Convention, namely its association with events of considerable historical significance. The citation also recognised the international impact of the rebuilding on the development of monument conservation. The application on behalf of Warsaw Old Town was accepted despite the fact that it did not satisfy the criterion of authenticity (ICOMOS, 1980, p. 2). However, the surroundings were restored with much less attention to their history. The result was a seamless mix of historic and modern forms that was intended to give the impression of timeless continuity. This was

apparently caused by a lack of detailed pre-war documentation (which existed for Warsaw's Old Town) (Zachwatowicz, 1956, p. 6). Moreover, an eclectic approach of this kind was in line with the principles of socialist realism, a cultural doctrine that was officially sponsored by the Polish state (following the example of Soviet Russia and other socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe) between 1949 and 1955. Socialist realism in architecture was characterised by revivalism and historicism, although the buildings designed in this style were generally far from being mere pastiches. The historical heritage, especially the centuries-old legacy of classicism (including not only its ancient sources but also their early modern interpretations), was, however, the most important source of inspiration for socialist realist architects (Friedrich, 2015, pp. 163, 187–188; see also: Molnár, 2013, pp. 30–68).

In Warsaw, the direct influence of socialist realism on the rebuilding of historic areas was especially evident in the case of New Town (*Nowe Miasto*) (the second oldest nucleus of medieval Warsaw, originally an independent city that was administratively merged with Old Town only in the late 18th century) and even more of *Mariensztat*, like New Town also situated adjacent to Old Town (Majewski, 2009, pp. 203–208). Mariensztat was a remnant of a private aristocratic enclave (*jurydyka*) that had been established in the mid-18th century and was originally excluded from municipal law (Szwankowski, 1970, p. 114). From the socialist perspective, the feudal origins of *Mariensztat* were not deserving of eulogy or commemoration, although it was the district's "capitalist" development during the 19th century that was in fact subject to most criticism in the socialist period (Stępiński, 1946, pp. 2–3). Mariensztat was rebuilt as a contemporary interpretation of early modern urban heritage, despite this having little to do with the architectural history of the area and its original street layout. Moreover, Mariensztat's 18th century buildings, to which its post-war architecture were supposed to refer, had been overwhelmingly built of wood, not brick (Szwankowski, 1970, p. 114). The rebuilt Mariensztat was thus the perfect expression of the historicist doctrine of socialist urban development and, simultaneously, a completely new creation (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4 Mariensztat in Warsaw. (Photo: M. Getka-Kenig, 2024, CC BY-SA)

3.2 Gdańsk – the Polonisation of German legacy

Even more drastic interventions of this type were planned, but ultimately never implemented in Gdańsk (formerly Danzig). This seaside city belonged to Poland in the medieval and early modern periods, but was under the influence of German culture for all this time. The nearly complete destruction of the historic centre of Gdańsk during the Second World War gave the socialist government an opportunity to rebuild it in such a way as to both emphasise its connection with Polishness and erase its unwanted German legacy (on the taming of Gdańsk's German legacy see: Friedrich, 2015, pp. 55–81; see also: Friedrich, 2012, pp. 115–130). The historic centre of Gdańsk that had been shattered by the war consisted primarily of two residential neighbourhoods: Main Town (*Główne Miasto*) and Old Town (*Stare Miasto*), both originating in the Middle Ages as independent, but adjacent cities (like Old and New Towns in Warsaw). Main Town, known for its spectacular public and ecclesiastical structures, was rebuilt as an essentially modern housing estate. Only the historic façades were reconstructed (however, such reconstructions were not meticulously faithful to the original), while the interiors were transformed in accordance with contemporary housing standards. There were only a few exceptions, such as Uphagen House, which was chosen to become a house museum, showcasing its well-preserved and sumptuous 18th century design (Friedrich, 2015, pp. 112–121).

By contrast, the reconstruction plan for Gdańsk's Old Town, which was never executed, provided for a much more radical modernisation of the urban space. Old Town was intended to become the new administrative and service centre of Gdańsk that would contain the communist party's local headquarters, the provincial national council (the highest local body of administrative power), a city cultural centre, as well as a square that could be used for public rallies and gatherings. The guidelines of the competition to design this area of Gdańsk specified that the city cultural centre should be an "ideological accent", visually dominating the entire historic area (including Main Town) due to its imposing scale, elevation on a small rise, and its direct axial connection with High Gate (*Brama Wyżynna*), the main historic entrance to Main Town. According to Jacek Friedrich, the design specs meant the building of the cultural centre would symbolise the domination over "not only the present but also the history of the city", even suggesting that it was a representation of "the culmination of this history" (Friedrich, 2015, pp. 179, 187). It was an architectural symbol of the Marxist philosophy of history, namely the idea of a teleological progression towards socialism through the ages. Eventually, however, such a spectacular rearrangement of Old Town's urban topography was rejected. The cultural centre was nevertheless established in this area, but it moved into the 16th century building of the district's town hall that luckily survived the war (Habela, 1975, p. 108).

The rich decoration added to the tenement houses of Gdańsk's Old Town during reconstruction was also an important tool of the symbolic Polonisation of Gdańsk's historic core. In addition to motifs openly referring to the history of Poland (even not necessarily related to Gdańsk), these pictorial and sculptural decorations were dominated by visual quotations from the art

of the Italian (especially Florentine) Renaissance. The Italian Renaissance shaped the development of Polish art and architecture in the 16th century but had little to do with Gdańsk's built heritage. Interestingly, according to the accounts of the artists who made them, the subject matters of these decorations were not forced upon them by the authorities in any way. However, they were expressions of the then-prevailing political climate in Gdańsk, which apparently influenced the artists who were engaged in reconstruction works (Friedrich, 2015, pp. 214–215, 231). For them, the Polonisation of the city's heritage did not need special justification, even if they were aware of the ahistorical nature of their artistic endeavours.

3.3 Poznań – heritage and modernity

The reconstruction of the historic centres of various Polish cities continued until the second half of the 1950s. While the socialist realism that prevailed at the turn of the 1950s favoured (more or less) historically oriented reconstruction, the political perturbations of the mid-1950s changed the situation significantly. Social and political factors such as the liberalisation of the regime, greater openness to Western Europe, and greater emphasis on economy (reconstructing historic architecture was very expensive) contributed to the appreciation of modernism in public architecture. This trend was manifested in the construction of purely modernist buildings within historic districts. This reflected not only a growing reluctance to reconstruct, but also the persistent (albeit expressed differently) desire to emphasise the connection of historic districts with modern social life. Individual conspicuous modernist buildings were built both in Warsaw's Old Town (e.g. the self-service restaurant on Zamkowy Square 1963–70) and in the immediate vicinity of Gdańsk's Main Town (theatre, 1956–1967, and shopping pavilion, 1959–61) (Leśniakowska, 2003, p. 188; Friedrich, 2015, pp. 294–315).

However, the most spectacular undertaking of this type was the modernist recreation of the cloth hall and arsenal in Poznań. Poznań is one of the oldest cities in Poland, and in the 10th century was the centre of monarchical power. Its historic district, also known as Old Town, dates from the 13th century, but it was rather the Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical architecture of the early modern era that dominated its urban landscape in the pre-war period. Poznań's Old Town was mostly destroyed in 1945, and its post-war reconstruction followed the example of Warsaw and Gdańsk in preserving an old street layout, eliminating many 19th century elements, reconstructing façades, and designing interiors in accordance with modern standards. Problems arose, however, around the design of the Market Square Central Block (*Blok Śródrynkowy*) in the middle of Old Market Square (*Stary Rynek*), just next to the monumental Renaissance city hall. In the Middle Ages, the site had been occupied by a complex of trading halls, but over the centuries, some of those structures had instead taken on residential and even military roles: former bread stalls were transformed into an arsenal in the 17th century. In the 19th century, many of those buildings were rebuilt as multi-story tenement houses.

There were several attempts to reconstruct the central block in the socialist realist style after 1945. However, conservators rejected all the proposed designs, criticising their lack of connection with the site's history and local architecture in general. The problem was the deficiency of visual documentation from the pre-capitalist period, particularly of the cloth hall and the arsenal. Eventually, a rather unusual compromise was reached in 1957: the eastern, northern, and western parts of the block were to be reconstructed according to historical sources, while the southern parts, namely the cloth hall and arsenal, were to be designed in the modernist style (as eventually built in 1959–1962, according to a design by Jan Cieśliński, Zygmunt Lutomski, and Regina Pawulanka). The new buildings were initially expected to serve commercial purposes, in accordance with their medieval roots. However, the city authorities eventually decided to give them a cultural role – as a contemporary art gallery and military museum (Kondziela, 1964, p. 67; Kondziela, 1975, pp. 70–77; Marciniak, 2008, p. 275) (Figure 5). As a result, the architecture of the central block became representative of three different styles: the Renaissance (city hall, scale house, a row of small tenement houses), Neoclassicism (city guardhouse), and Modernism. The modernist element, clearly standing out against such a backdrop, was a symbol of Poznań's contemporary development and unequivocal orientation towards the future. The past was still an object of reverence, but it was the idea of progress and change rather than the transmission of timeless principles (so characteristic of socialist realism) that apparently motivated this concept.

FIGURE 5 Modernist pavilions at Old Market Square in Poznań's Old Town. (Photo: M. Getka-Kenig, 2024, CC BY-SA)

4 RESTORATION OF SURVIVING HISTORIC DISTRICTS

In the history of the socialist historic district protection policy, the significance of the political breakthrough of 1956 (the so-called Polish thaw) and the rejection of socialist realism were not limited to declining interest in historical reconstructions. At the same time, the authorities had developed an interest in the problems of well-preserved but previously neglected monuments, including historic districts. Despite the significant destruction of urban areas during WWII, there was no shortage of both large and small cities in which districts dominated by early modern and even medieval buildings survived. Among important events that led the authorities to address this issue there was the official celebration of the millennium of the Polish state between 1960 and 1966 (Noszczak, 2020, pp. 108–190). During this period, the socialist authorities strongly emphasised their attachment to the centuries-long national history that found its supposed climax in the Polish People's Republic (Poland's official name since 1952).

4.1 Kraków – national heritage and European identity

The rebuilding of the historic centre of Kraków was the most important undertaking in the field of post-war restorations of historic districts. Kraków was the capital of the Kingdom of Poland between the 11th and late 16th centuries and had the largest concentration of buildings entered in the official register of monuments in the early 1960s (Fischinger & Lepiarczyk, 1964, p. 12). Kraków survived the war with little damage, and afterwards, it became the subject of large industrial investments. Between 1950 and 1954, the socialist authorities built one of Poland's largest steelworks on its outskirts. The plant gave rise to a new town called Nowa Huta (literally "new foundry" or "new steelworks"), which was incorporated as a district of Kraków in 1951. At the same time, the historic city centre, officially known as Old Town since 1954 and including the distinct areas of Inner City, Kazimierz, and Stradom, was falling into neglect. It was there that a significant part of Krakow's inhabitants lived (as well as those who had moved there from destroyed cities in the immediate post-war years) (Lepiarczyk, 1955, pp. 195–203; Skiba, 1976, p. 100). The restoration process, which had been initiated by the local administration in the 1950s but only became a special long-term government programme in 1961, consisted not only in renovating historic buildings but also in reducing the overall building density by demolishing structures in the courtyards (thereby increasing access to light). Most of these structures dated from the 19th and early 20th centuries, and their removal was therefore also ideologically justified as symbolically liberating Kraków's Old Town from "capitalist" modifications. However, the authorities also sought to establish a new function for the renovated Old Town as the central district of modern Kraków. According to an official restoration programme, accepted by Kraków's governing body in 1962, it was intended to become primarily a service district, with a lower number of permanent residents, and more focused on administrative, cultural, educational, and tourist activities (Skiba, 1976, pp. 108–109).

The process of thoroughly restoring Kraków's Old Town was initially scheduled to end no later than 1970 (Skiba, 1976, p. 107). However, it eventually outlasted the socialist regime, which fell in 1989. In effect, Kraków's Old Town became a distinctly specialised district of the modern city, in which the past was still one of the most significant pillars of local identity. Although the district's population density was being gradually lowered, Old Town retained its specific symbolic status as a true centre of the city. It also started to serve as an international asset for the Polish state. During the 1960s and 1970s, it was often included in the itineraries of state visits to Poland, including those of representatives of capitalist countries (Estreicher, 1980, p. 91; Chwalba, 2004, p. 111). The regime apparently regarded it as testimony to Poland's eternal Europeanness and its direct cultural ties with the West. In the aftermath of the 1956 thaw, Poland embarked on a partial foreign-policy rapprochement with the West. In this way, Kraków's renovated built heritage was able to support the state's international legitimacy. Moreover, the government succeeded in convincing UNESCO to accept Kraków's Old Town as the first European historic district inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1978. UNESCO awarded this distinction in response to the Polish application that stressed Kraków's "important place in European art by virtue of its geographical location and its role as a centre of western art, which was in contact with cultural influences coming from the East during the Middle Ages and in the 16th and 17th centuries" (World Heritage Centre Nomination Documentation, 1978, p. [9]). Note that Poland submitted Kraków's candidature together with that of the rebuilt Old Town of Warsaw (eventually accepted two years later). These two historic, but very different, districts, the original and the reconstructed one, appeared to supplement each other in representing Poland's heterogeneous contribution to the world's urban heritage.

4.2 Toruń – the persistence of the German complex

Kraków occupied a unique place in the Polish historical imagination as a national symbol; consequently, it managed to attract the special attention of the socialist government, which was constantly longing for legitimacy. In the 1960s, however, analogous state-funded restoration programmes were also implemented in other cities and towns, such as Toruń. Toruń's Old Town was the second-largest complex of monuments in Poland to survive the war (Rymaszewski, 1986, p. 502). It was hardly comparable with its counterpart in Kraków with respect to symbolic significance in Polish history, although it was known as the birthplace of Nicolaus Copernicus (in Poland known as Mikołaj Kopernik). Copernicus was seen then as one of the greatest Poles ever, although his national identity had been disputed since the emergence of modern Polish nationalism in the early 19th century (Kasparek & Kasparek, 2023). His case was symptomatic of the more general problem of Toruń's cultural heritage, which, like Gdańsk, had been significantly influenced by German culture since the Middle Ages. While the large-scale conservation programme for Toruń's Old Town originated in the period of the millennium

celebrations, it was the expected 500th anniversary of Copernicus's birthday in 1973 that was its most significant stimulus (Sudziński, 1989, pp. 199–203).

The restoration of the city's Old Town led to the elimination of many 19th century structures dating from the period when Toruń belonged to Prussia and then the German Reich (Rymaszewski, 1986, pp. 503, 506). It was thus an act of de-Germanisation. A medieval castle that had once belonged to the Teutonic Knights in Toruń was preserved as a ruin in order to keep it as an eternal symbol of Polish victories over the Germans prior to the Second World War. The restoration of the "permanent ruin" was intended to mark the anniversary of the famous Second Peace of Toruń (1466), concluding the longest war with the Teutonic Order and resulting in Poland's regained access to the Baltic Sea (Sudziński, 1989, pp. 198–199; Rymaszewski, 1986, p. 503). The restoration of Toruń's Old Town also led to the establishment of a museum dedicated to Copernicus in the house believed to have belonged to his family, which was opened in 1973 (Mazurkiewicz, 1988, p. 7).

4.3 Sandomierz – a vision of monumental Poland

In connection with the millennium celebrations in the 1960s, similar centrally funded restoration programmes were also implemented in much smaller but historically significant towns such as Sandomierz. The town played an important role in the political and economic history of Poland in the Middle Ages and early modern era but lost this position in the 18th century. The 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of decline in Sandomierz's history, although the economic backwardness apparently helped to save the town's medieval core from drastic urban changes. Sandomierz's Old Town also avoided destruction during the Second World War. Apart from the millennium celebrations, the idea of revitalising Sandomierz's historic centre was also motivated by the post-war increase in the town's regional significance as an industrial and tourist centre. However, the direct impulse to implement the large-scale government programme for the renovation of the historic city centre was a number of construction disasters during the 1960s, resulting from the collapse of houses built on loess soil (Kalinowski, 1986, p. 426). The restoration of Sandomierz's historic centre involved quite far-reaching interventions in its architectural heritage, such as the addition of a storey or redesign of façades. Among the buildings enlarged and refashioned in this way was the "Gomółka House", which had supposedly belonged to the famous Polish Renaissance musician Mikołaj Gomółka (ca. 1535–1591) (Łoziński & Przypkowski, 1962, p. 98). The "upgraded" version of the building was apparently deemed more worthy of the town's great citizen, commemorated in a large (nearly two-stories high) plaque on its side wall. In addition, the east frontage of Market Square (*Rynek*) was rebuilt, replacing its humbler predecessor without any historical justification (Kalinowski, 1986, p. 427) (Figure 6). As a result, Sandomierz's Old Town became more monumental than it had ever been in the past. Although it was not a completely new creation, as in the case of Mariensztat in Warsaw, the architectural and urban heritage of Sandomierz had been "improved" to look more impressive. It

FIGURE 6 Gomółka House and the east frontage Square in Sandomierz's Old Town. (Photo: M. Getka-Kenig, 2024, CC BY-SA)

seems that the renovated Old Town was expected to better reflect the real significance of the city in national history, while also entering into a symbolic dialogue with modern architectural undertakings such as a major glassworks (situated on the other side of the river and visible from Old Town) and the housing estates built outside the historic area (on Sandomierz's urban and industrial development see: Meducki, 1994, pp. 227–229; Wendlandt, 1994, pp. 273–274).

5 CONCLUSION

The authorities of socialist Poland maintained their interest in historic districts for decades, through a variety of political changes. Initially focused on post-war rebuilding, they later turned to areas that survived the war but required comprehensive restoration. These were seemingly different problems, but they had one important thing in common: they both provided the socialist government with an opportunity to reshape the contemporary vision of the past. Historic districts were an integral element of post-war urban development. Their appearance had a significant impact on a local, national, and sometimes (as in the case of Warsaw and Kraków) international scale. Architecture served to represent a vision of the past that could support and legitimise the present, namely the socialist regime. Just as the development of cities and towns in post-war Poland was an expression of economic and social progress, the socialist rearrangement of historic districts testified that this development was not accidental. They proved that, as they saw it, socialism was not at odds with history, but, on the contrary, it was its natural outcome.

REFERENCES

Bazyler, M. J., Lee Boyd, K., Nelson, K. L., & Shah, R. L. (2019). *Searching for justice after the Holocaust: Fulfilling the Terezin Declaration and immovable property restitution*. Oxford University Press.

Biegański, P. (1956). Odbudowa Starego Miasta w Warszawie jako dzielnicy mieszkaniowej. In P. Biegański (Ed.), *Stare Miasto w Warszawie* (pp. 7–18). Wydawnictwo Budownictwo i Architektura.

Chwalba, A. (2004). *Dzieje Krakowa. Kraków w latach 1945–1989*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Chwedoruk, R. (2018). *Polityka historyczna*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Dettloff, P. (2006). *Odbudowa i restauracja zabytków architektury w Polsce w latach 1918–1939. Teoria i praktyka*. TAiWPN UNIVERSITAS.

Dziennik Ustaw. (1928). Rozporządzenie Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej z dnia 6 marca 1928 r. o opiece nad zabytkami. Retrieved June 24, 2024, from https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19280290265

Dziennik Ustaw. (1945a). Dekret z dnia 26 października 1945 r. o własności i użytkowaniu gruntów na obszarze m. st. Warszawy. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19450500279

Dziennik Ustaw. (1945b). Dekret z dnia 26 października 1945 r. o rozbiórce i naprawie budynków zniszczonych i uszkodzonych wskutek wojny. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19450500281

Dziennik Ustaw (1959). Ustawa z dnia 22 kwietnia 1959 r. o remontach i odbudowie oraz o wykańczaniu budowy i nadbudowie budynków mieszkalnych. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19590270166

Estreicher, K. (1980). *Muzeum Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

Fischinger, A. & Lepiarczyk, J. (1964). Miasto Kraków. In P. Maliszewski (Ed.). *Spis zabytków architektury i budownictwa.* Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki (pp. 11–19).

Friedrich, J. (2012). Polish and German heritage in Danzig/Gdańsk: 1918, 1945 and 1989. In M. Rampley (Ed.), *Heritage, ideology, and identity in Central and Eastern Europe: Contested pasts, contested presents*. The Boydell Press (pp. 115–130).

Friedrich, J. (2015). *Odbudowa Głównego Miasta w Gdańsku w latach 1945–1960*. Wydawnictwo słowo/ obraz terytoria.

Geering, C. (2022). Transnational heritage networks in socialist Eastern and Central Europe. In E. Gantner, C. Geering & P. Vickers (Eds.), *Heritage under Socialism: Preservation in Eastern and Central Europe, 1945–1991* (pp. 217–236). Berghahn.

Geering, C., Vickers, P. (2022). Heritage under socialism: Trajectories of preserving the tangible past in postwar Eastern and Central Europe. In E. Gantner, C. Geering, & P. Vickers (Eds.), *Heritage under socialism: Preservation in Eastern and Central Europe, 1945–1991* (pp. 1–32). Berghahn.

Habela, J. (1975), *Ratusz staromiejski w Gdańsku*. Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.

ICOMOS Advisory Body Evaluation. (1980). The historic center of Warsaw. Retrieved June 24, 2024, from https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/30/documents/

Jaworska, H., Kietlicz-Wojnacki, W. (1956). *Warszawa nasza stolica*. Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza.

Kalinowski, W. (1986). Sandomierz. In W. Zin (Ed.), *Zabytki urbanistyki i architektury w Polsce: Odbudowa i konserwacja* (Vol. 1, pp. 423–428). Wydawnictwo Arkady.

Kasparek, N., Kasparek D. (2023). A discourse on Copernicus' nationality in the first half of the 19th century – a monographic article. *Echa Przeszłości*, *24*(1), 121–134.

Kieniewicz, S. (1982). Rewolucyjne tradycje dzielnicy staromiejskiej. In E. Borecka (Ed.), *Warszawskie Stare Miasto: Z dziejów odbudowy* (pp. 75–82).

Kondziela, H. (1964). Prace konserwatorskie – miasto Poznań (1958–1962). *Ochrona Zabytków*, *17*(3), 65–77.

Kondziela, H. (1975). *Stare Miasto w Poznaniu: Zniszczenia – odbudowa – program dalszych prac*. Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.

Lepiarczyk, J. (1955). Stan i potrzeby Krakowa w zakresie ratownictwa i konserwacji zabytków. *Ochrona Zabytków, 8*(3), 195–203.

Leśniakowska, M. (2003). *Architektura w Warszawie 1945–1965*. Arkada.

Lewicka, M. (1992). *Atlas architektury Starego Miasta w Warszawie*. Arkady.

Łoziński, J. Z., Przypkowski, T. (1962). *Katalog zabytków sztuki w Polsce: Powiat sandomierski* (vol. 3, no. 11). Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk.

Majewski, P. (2009). *Ideologia i konserwacja: Architektura zabytkowa w Polsce w czasach socrealizmu*. Wydawnictwo TRIO.

Majewski, J. S., Markiewicz, T (1998). *Warszawa nie odbudowana*. DiG.

Marciniak, P. (2008). Galeria Miejska Arsenał. In J. Pazdera (Ed.), *Atlas architektury Poznania* (p. 275). Wydawnictwo Miejskie.

Mazurkiewicz, J. (1988). Muzeum Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu. Powstanie, rozwój, działalność w latach 1960–1985. *Rocznik Toruński, 18*, 5–20.

Molnár, V. (2013). *Building the State: Architecture, politics, and state formation in post-war Central Europe*. Routledge.

Noszczak, B. (2020). *Anty-milenium: Konflikt państwa z Kościołem na tle obchodów tysiąclecia chrztu Polski (1956–1966/1967)*. Instytut Pamięci Narodowej.

Popiołek-Roßkamp, M. (2021). *Warschau: Ein Wiederaufbau, der vor dem Krieg begann*. Brill Schöningh.

Röttjer, J. (2022). International experts – national martyrdom – socialist heritage. The contribution of the Polish People's Republic to the early UNESCO World Heritage Program. In E. Gantner, C. Geering & P. Vickers (Eds.), *Heritage under socialism: Preservation in Eastern and Central Europe, 1945–1991*. Berghahn.

Rymaszewski, B. (1986). Toruń. In W. Zin (Ed.), *Zabytki urbanistyki i architektury w Polsce: Odbudowa i konserwacja* (vol. 1, pp. 499–508). Wydawnictwo Arkady.

Sigalin, J. (1986). *Warszawa 1944–1980. Z archiwum architekta* (vol. 2). Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

Skiba, J. (1976). *Rewaloryzacja zespołów zabytkowych Krakowa*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Stępiński, Z. (1946). Mariensztat. *Skarpa Warszawska, 2*(3), 2–3.

Sudziński, R. (1989). Ochrona i rewaloryzacja zespołu staromiejskiego. In Cz. Niedzielski (Ed.), *O życiu kulturalnym w Toruniu w latach 1945–1985* (pp. 194–216). Toruńskie Towarzystwo Kultury.

Szwankowski, E. (1970). *Ulice i place Warszawy*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

World Heritage Centre Nomination Documentation. (1978). *Cracow's Historic Centre*. Retrieved June 24, 2024, from https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/29/documents/

Zachwatowicz, J. (1956). Wstęp. In P. Biegański (Ed.), *Stare Miasto w Warszawie* (pp. 5–6). Wydawnictwo Budownictwo i Architektura.

Zarząd Miejski w Krakowie. (1937). Konkurs powszechny na projekt uporządkowania Rynku Głownego, placu Mariackiego, Rynku Małego oraz placu Szczepańskiego w Krakowie. *Architektura i Budownictwo*, *13*(3), 74–82.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland under grant number 2020/39/D/HS3/01189.
I would like to thank the editors of the volume and the anonymous reviewers for all their useful comments and suggestions.

BIOGRAPHY

Mikołaj Getka-Kenig is an Associate Professor at the Institute for the History of Science, Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. He holds his Master's degrees in history and art history, and a doctorate and habilitation in history. His research interests include the problem of the politics of art and architecture from 1770–1830 as well as heritage policies in socialist Poland from 1945–1989. He currently leads a research project entitled 'Architectural Monuments and the Politics of History in Communist Poland – the Case of Kraków 1945–78', funded by the National Science Centre, Poland. ORCID number: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1180-064X.