

IF WALLS COULD TALK

AGNIESZKA ZABLOCKA-KOS
EXTERNAL SENIOR FELLOW
SCHOOL OF HISTORY



Agnieszka Zablocka-Kos, who has been carrying out research at the School of History since October 2011, brings architecture and history together in a unique way. She is working on an interdisciplinary portrayal of urban development and architecture in Central European cities between 1815 and 1918. Zablocka-Kos, who studied both architecture and art history, sees herself as an architectural historian who actively seeks out new ways of looking at things. “I am an art historian looking through the eyes of an architect and an architect looking through the eyes of an art historian,” she explains. A professor at the University of Wrocław, she views architecture as an unwritten historical source and uses it to retrace the past, in order “to decode the secret language of buildings and ensembles of buildings”.

“The more you discover about architecture, the more you learn about history,” states Zablocka-Kos. This is the central thread which runs throughout her research work. Her much acclaimed habilitation thesis is entitled “Die Stadt verstehen” (“Understanding the City”) and looks at how the city centre of Wrocław developed into its present-day form.

Her current research project focuses on the entire historical region of Central Europe, encompassing Lviv, Berlin, Strasbourg and Budapest. She intends to compare the architecture of 19th-century divided Poland, which was forced to submit to German, Austrian and Russian rule, with the architecture of the German and Habsburg Empires, and to show how political dependency and imperial claims to power were reflected in urban architecture. To do so, she is studying the Polish cities of Poznań, Warsaw, Cracow and Vilnius, as well as Prague, Brno, Liberec and Vienna in Austria-Hungary, and Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, Hamburg, Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig in the German Empire. She is well acquainted with all the cities, thanks to taking a great many photographs of them and conducting analyses of their architectural history. “During the 19th century, the centres of all these cities became a target for political architecture, which aimed to represent the balance of power at the time,” states Zablocka-Kos. This political appropriation of public spaces in city centres during the middle of the industrial revolution is the main focus of Agnieszka Zablocka-Kos’s research project.

By examining a variety of building types spread across a wide geographical area, she was able to go beyond conducting separate, detailed studies of the cities’ architectural history and make general statements about the “macroarchitecture” in the three dominions, as well as the history of relations between them.

All of this will be incorporated into her new book, which she is writing for art historians, historians and the wider general public alike. To explain this approach she states, “I want to write readable books, so that I can reach a lot of people.” She is currently working on a chapter about the cities’ former citadels. These fortifications were enormously large areas which were transformed during the course of the 19th century. The cities were “defortified” and imposing new areas with political buildings were constructed in place of the old fortifications. In Freiburg, Zablocka-Kos has identified an impressive area of this kind located along the axis of the theatre, Platz der Alten Synagoge and the university.

She describes her research technique as a “kaleidoscope method”. Every time you turn a kaleidoscope, the numerous individual pieces of glass within it form a new image and, as explained by Zablocka-Kos, “this turning represents the passing of time”. “To be more specific, a building’s meaning can change within a period of just ten years and all the more so after 100 years.” Using the example of a former Saxon square in Warsaw, she explains how such a process occurs. In the 18th century, this square was the forecourt of the residence inhabited by the Saxon prince who was also king of Poland.

In the 19th century, after Poland had lost its independence, the palace was converted into the Russian garrison headquarters and the square became a military training area. Finally, at the end of the 19th century, a Russian-Orthodox cathedral was constructed on this spot as a symbol of the new Russian power at that time. “The former Saxon square therefore assumed a series of different identities,” states Zablocka-Kos. “What it always represented, however, was the political power of the time and this can clearly be seen when looking at the architecture. The walls tell its story.”

Making walls talk and unlocking their “biographies” is Zablocka-Kos’s principal aim. “I want to decipher and spread this knowledge,” she stresses. She feels equally bound to teach her students and to make her findings available to the public at large. As a result, she publishes a tremendous amount of work and gives advice to a variety of institutions, including Polish preservers of monuments and historic buildings. She regularly organises exhibitions with her students with the intention of raising civil society’s awareness in her home country. To do so also requires looking at Poland’s post-war architectural heritage. There is, however, another reason behind her passion for 1960s architecture. As a former student of architecture, she still today feels a duty to her former lecturers. Therefore, together with her students, she researched the life stories of post-war Polish architects and interviewed a number of them, before compiling a list of the buildings worth conserving as a legacy of post-war Poland. This resulted in Poland’s post-war modern architecture

growing in importance. In an article written for the *Gazeta Wyborcza* Wrocław, Zablocka-Kos used the former pathology lecture hall, which is today used by FRIAS as an auditorium, as an example of successful monument protection. For her, the building, which was constructed in 1955, is a perfect example of how even architecture from this period leaves a valuable legacy worthy of protection.

Agnieszka Zablocka-Kos is using her time in Freiburg at FRIAS wisely. “Such opportunities come along so rarely in life,” she states cheerfully. She is especially enjoying the access to so many books and journals which are not (yet) available in Polish libraries. “The international research, the networks, the library and the multitude of new ideas – it’s fantastic,” she enthuses. She is also pleased about the international attention her fellowship has bestowed on her. “The interest is so great that I’m going to present my project at a number of European institutes.” (ak)