

F

irst Contact with Culture

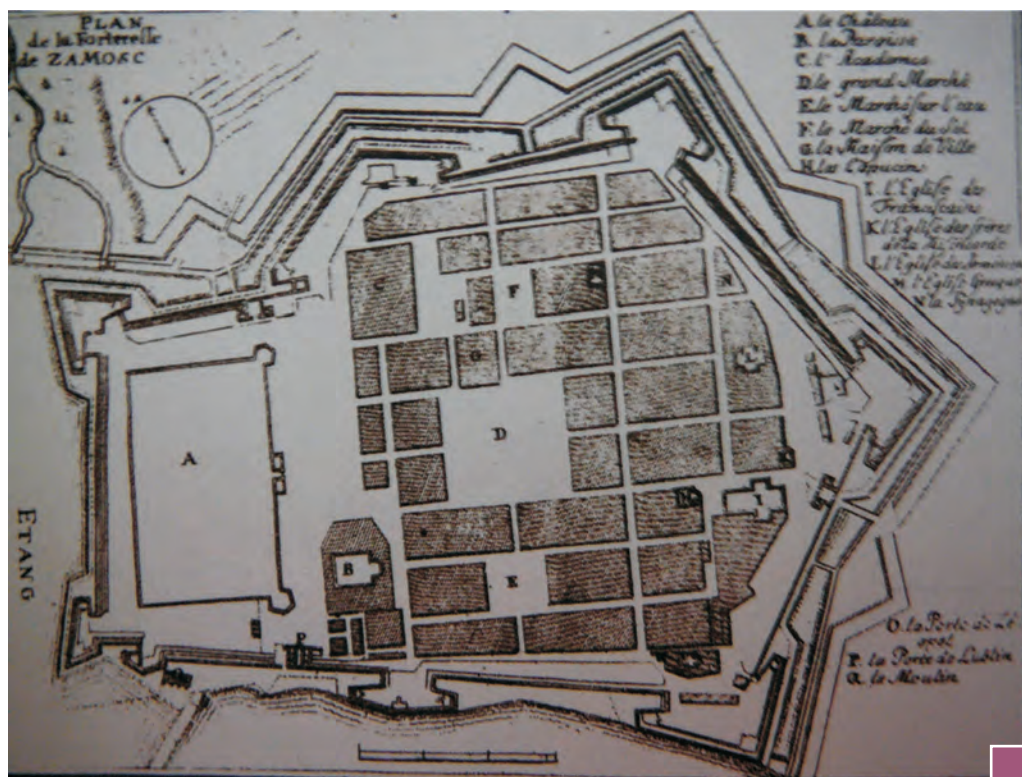
Poland

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When we travel to a place we have never visited before, the important thing before we set off is to have at least some idea about the history of the city and the country we are going to. Once we arrive at our destination, we take a stroll down its streets and examine its architecture, monuments and residents. We look at how people are dressed and what they do, we see them rush off to work or sit idly at cafés and enjoy life. This is our first contact with culture.

Depending on how much time we have, we explore historical places and learn about their history, styles, and owners, and we also look for cultural events. If we have more time we visit one or more museums and churches. Are museums attractive at all for people nowadays?

Those who had a chance to hop on the excursion bus in Dublin could hear the driver refer to the stop for the Natural History Museum as "the dead zoo". Well, our museums are neither dead nor dusty any more. The popularity of the *Museum Night* events shows that it is fashionable to visit museums at night simultaneously with millions of people around the world. But why are churches worth visiting? Churches are not only religious places where some of the most important ceremonies took place in the past. They are also great examples of architectural styles, and given the great number of frescos, pictures, sculptures and other objects of the highest value on display, churches can be seen as a special type of museum.



Plan of Zamość Fortress from middle 17th century:
http://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Plik:Twierdza_zamoscplan.JPG&filetimestamp=200707102



The historical centres of Polish cities are being renovated and brought back to life. The façades, window woodwork, portals, doors, road surfaces, ruins and greens are undergoing restoration. They are regaining their former decorations and colours.

In this paper we would like to focus on some manifestations of culture one can come in contact with when visiting Poland.

Cities in Poland started playing an important cultural role during the Middle Ages. The formal recognition of a city consisted of granting it a city charter which described its location, territory, role and political system, i.e. its relationship with and dependence on other cities and the ruler. Sometimes the city's location was only a formal statement of the situation. More often, though, cities were located on the so-called "crude root", i.e. in areas that were not previously urbanized. In cases of successful locations, cities would turn into cultural centres on a regional or cross-regional scale. The formation of Polish cities took place

city of Zamość, established by an influential Polish magnate Jan Zamoyski and planned by an Italian architect Bernardo Morando. Its design is characterized by an anthropomorphic town planning conception according to which the urban structure is intended to resemble the human body. In Zamość the role of the head or the most important part of the body which governs the whole organism was assigned to the palace; the role of the spine or the main axis of the composition was assigned to the street joining the palace with a bastion at the opposite end; the role of the lungs is played by Academia and the collegiate church; the City Market is a reflection of the stomach, while the side markets are the city's kidneys. The bastions which play a defensive role are the city's hands and legs. In the Middle Ages cities

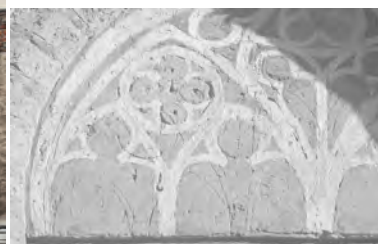


Details of Gothic house
in Toruń where
Nicolaus Copernicus
was born

at the time of an increasing importance of the bourgeoisie, whose tastes influenced in most cases both the urban design and the church furnishings. Even today one can observe in Poland examples of urban design dating back to medieval times. In contrast with Western Europe, where cities developed in an evolutionary manner, in Poland cities were built from scratch in empty fields. They would be erected on a checkerboard ground floor plan, with a network of streets crossing at right angles leaving space for rectangular buildings. In the city centre there is usually a market square with a town hall and a parish church. In the Renaissance period architects and philosophers tried to design a model of "the ideal city". One of the best examples is the private



lived with the awareness of a continuous threat of attack and for this reason they were always accompanied by fortifications. In the Renaissance period new fortifications adapted to firearms were added.

What can a tourist see in the Polish cities of today? Without a doubt, the urban landscape is still dominated, just like in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, by homogenous blocks of flats dating back to the Communist period. They were built mainly outside of the historical city centres and in the suburbs, and have been homes to a significant proportion of the Polish population. At the time of their construction, i.e. from the 1960s to the late 1980s, the government considered them to be



Old bricks with modern glass.
Tenement house from 17th century
after restoration in 1992-1994.
Toruń, 13 Żeglarska Street.
Picture by Piotr Koźurno





a symbol of modern housing and a part of a special goods sector. In spite of the homogeneity of the blocks of flats, there were also some unusual solutions, such as the longest 'wavy block' in Gdańsk, measuring around 850 meters in length and housing nearly 6000 occupants. In every city, attention was paid to the quick development of new, modern houses whilst the older tenements were condemned to a slow destruction as relics of the bourgeois injustice.

When the Solidarity movement's long struggles with the totalitarian regime and the changing geopolitical situation brought about the fall of Communism in Poland in 1989, some changes began and became visible also in urban development. The recognition of autonomy and of individual initiative brought about significant diversity in the sector of construction – a diversity that degenerated into curiosity when the well-off who could now travel without constraints to exotic places tried to flaunt their experience and wealth by way of

Polish nobility's country manors. Also, it is not uncommon for those blocks of flats whose construction was centrally planned rather than freely chosen to undergo conversion work.

But leaving aside all such aspects that obscure the essential character of cities, we need to ask which of the really important things a foreign traveller is likely to see on visiting Poland. The old, medieval cities attract the largest numbers of tourists. In the majority of cities the old town is worth seeing provided that it was not destroyed during the course of the many wars which shook Poland throughout the centuries. The old towns abound with old tenements which unfortunately quite often partly lost their character due to lack of maintenance in the after-war period (until the 1990s). Their new owners, fascinated by modernity and not respecting the conservators' bans, frequently installed new plastic windows and doors, throwing away the original ones. The original, beautiful red roof tiles were replaced with new ones. Red they may be, but as plastic and mass



Decoration on
former parish school
in Toruń
on St. John's St.

implementing foreign architectural solutions in their new houses. Today such examples of bad taste are still visible in public spaces. But after this period of thoughtless valuing of freedom for freedom's sake in construction, new and aesthetically pleasing houses accompanied by neat gardens began to be built in Poland. Such constructions are characterized by beautiful proportions, and their porches with colonnades often invoke the style of the

produced 'ersatzes' they lack the hand-made style of the originals. The medieval, Romanesque and more often Gothic churches, which were mostly spared the fate of the tenements, have survived until today as examples of good architecture. Many Polish cities are situated on the tourist route called the European Route of Brick Gothic (EuRoB)¹, which includes 32 cities with Gothic architecture in 7 countries situated on the coasts of the Baltic

Sea. Apart from Poland, these countries are Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

Among historic cities that have been preserved in Poland in their original substance we can name Cracow, Toruń, Lublin, Sandomierz and Chełmno. There have also survived until the present day significant parts of the old towns of Poznań, Łowicz and Kazimierz on the Vistula River. Large fragments of Warsaw² and Gdańsk's old towns have been rebuilt and so their former beauty can be admired again. Heritage conservation in Poland is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

Former factory buildings are currently adapted to serve as shopping centres or human dwellings (lofts). An example of such an adaptation of a factory into one of the biggest commerce, service and entertainment centres is Manufaktura in Łódź. Manufaktura covers 27 hectares of a factory that belonged to one of the most powerful of Łódź's industrialists, Izrael Poznański, who established a factory complex here in the fourth quarter of the 19th century. The complex covered almost 30 hectares and consisted of weaving mills, fabric printing houses, machine construction and repair department, steam engine house, fire station, siding, factory palace and workers' flats. The conversion of Manufaktura was intended to maintain its former exterior looks

"The Old Brewery"
Center of Commerce
in Poznań
after revitalization.
Picture by Piotr Kozurno





Late-Gothic details
of Toruń cathedral

and to join them with modern furnishings of the interiors. The dominant feature is therefore red non-plastered brick of the walls of several former halls and production buildings. What attracts our attention is also the former spinning mill at Ogródowa Street which currently houses a luxurious hotel and a conference centre³. Yet another example of adaptation of a formerly industrial building for the miscellaneous purposes of the contemporary city is "The Old Brewery" Centre for Commerce, Art and Business built in Poznań in 2003 and expanded in 2007. The building was designed using the existing 19th century Brewery of the Hugger Family⁴. It is a combination of a trade building with an art gallery.

Igor Mitoraj's sculpture
in the
Center of Commerce,
Poznań,
"The Old Brewery".
Picture by Piotr Kozurno



The Institute of Art "Island"⁵ is an interesting initiative established in 2004 in the former location of the Gdańsk Shipyards and housed in the building of the Basic School of Ship Construction. The Institute works as a gallery as well as a place for investigation and education. It is intended to play a stimulating role, both intellectually and artistically, for the places where there once used to be shipyards. The Institute owns a collection, a library, a publishing house and an archive of contemporary art, as well as a club. The Institute of Art "Island" is an important part of the public debate regarding the historical role and the future of the former shipyards. The project serves several purposes, connecting the cultural values with the broadly understood public good, taking part in the building of a new, dynamic and creative community, and connecting the exhibition of contemporary art with debates regarding social culture.

Revitalization has been undertaken in Poland in such cities as Bielsko-Biała, Bydgoszcz, Elbląg, Gdańsk, Głogów, Łódź, Kołobrzeg, Cracow⁶, Poznań, Radom, the Praga Północ as well as other quarters of the capital, Słupsk, Szczecin, Toruń, Wolin, Wrocław, the already mentioned city of Zamość, and Żyrardów. An example of an actively conducted revitalization may be found in the actions taken in Młyńska Island in Bydgoszcz⁷. Around 20% of Polish cities have prepared revitalization programmes (around 180 programmes) and 1/3 of them are currently putting them into effect⁸.

Revitalization is a process of carrying out spatial, technical, social and economic changes for the public good. The purpose of these changes is to lift the area from crisis, to restore its former functions or find new ones, and to create conditions for its future development.

The historical centres of Polish cities are being renovated and brought back to life. The façades, window woodwork, portals, doors, road surfaces, ruins and greens are undergoing restoration. They are regaining their former decorations and colours and are accompanied by historical commentaries. But even such historical complexes of urban architecture are not free from the ubiquitous advertisements that have penetrated into the Polish public space. While their plastic design often makes them visually attractive and while they certainly have more appeal than the socialist slogans that praised labour, they overflow the streets with masses of information and signs that frequently introduce stylistically alien forms, a thing that is particularly offensive in old quarters.

The cities' greens are being tidied up and revitalized to provide more space for spending free time. The city squares are being embellished with specially designed fountains, whether old ones, as in case of the Neptune's Fountain in Gdańsk, or new ones which make use of colourful multimedia spectacles in Wrocław and Toruń. There are more and more flower plants in the windows and in front of the buildings. Numerous cafés in the open air revive and ornament the public space, making it feel more cosy and close to the residents and the growing numbers of tourists. The city's space is also being filled up by street art: smaller and bigger sculptural works which permanently save from oblivion the memory of the cities' eminent residents (e.g. Julian Tuwim, a poet on a bench in Łódź, or Marian Rejewski, a member of the group which broke the Enigma code, on a bench in Bydgoszcz), and of the cities' history (e.g. the clay half-figures of the medieval burghers in the recesses of the historical buildings of Toruń's old town); graffiti that is made either *ad hoc* or in the space especially destined for this purpose on the build-

ings, under the bridges, along the arterial highways; and also commercials in the shape of murals⁹, photo galleries, museum exhibitions in public spaces. The city streets are being adorned and transformed by light, as happened during the International Festival of Light SKYWAY in Toruń when the façade of the church of the Holy Spirit in the frontage of the Old Market was illuminated with the calendar cycle that captivated the crowd of tourists and residents of the city of Copernicus with its colours, sound and the fantasy of its images.

In the summer months the streets are enlivened by the actors of the street theatres, numerous concerts and cultural festivals, performance art and shows, acting out scenes from the past. In the winter months an important cultural event is the prestigious International Film Festival of the Art of Cinematography Plus Camerimage, which originated in Toruń, later relocated to Łódź, and currently takes place in Bydgoszcz¹⁰. There are also other theatre and cinema festivals and festivals of different cultures, such as the Festival of the Dialogue of the Four Cultures, i.e. German, Jewish, Polish and Russian, which had a big impact on the history of Łódź¹¹ or the Festival of Jewish Culture in Cracow¹².

An undeniable attraction of the Polish cities are their museums. In Poland, there are 9 national museums in Gdańsk, Kielce, Cracow, Poznań, Przemyśl, Szczecin, Szreniawa, Warsaw and Wrocław. They consist of 47 departments which are in fact separate entities¹³ and there are also around 900 museums of different kinds. The national museums are especially worth visiting, but one should not overlook the smaller museums situated on the peripheries, in old manors and palaces, such as the Museum in Nieborów and in Arkadia,

Details of
Gothic house
in Toruń
where
Nicolaus Copernicus
was born



Figurines.
Szczytna St.
Toruń,
by Alicja Bogacka.
Picture by
Piotr Kozurno



Museum of the Zamojski Family in Kozłówka or the Museum of Carriages in Łańcut located near the Castle of the Lubomirski Family.

The Polish cities are becoming more and more beautiful, and despite their complicated history they still have a lot to offer. Currently, cities that have been until recently considered ugly

and unattractive are being discovered anew and acquiring a new image. They are changing thanks to the embellishment of the public space and the attempts to reinterpret the history of past epochs, including recent ones such as the period between the end of the Second World War and 1989.

REFERENCE S:

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2. see short information on the UNESCO Heritage List: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/30>
3. An animation showing the revitalization of Manufaktura in Łódź: www.wirtualnafabryka.com/
4. To get to know the history of the edifice go to www.starybrowar5050.com/en/miejscce/idea
5. see http://www.wyspa.art.pl/title_lang.2.html
6. see www.rewitalizacja.krakow.pl/
7. see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bydgoszcz>
8. a list of the examples see: www.rewitalizacja.silesia.org.pl/
9. The European Festival of Monumental Art in Gdańsk www.monumentalart.eu/index.php?lang=en a database with thousands of examples of graffiti from Poland: www.murale.mnc.pl/
10. see www.pluscamerimage.pl/index.php?lang=en
11. see <http://en.4kultura.pl/>
12. see www.jewishfestival.pl/index.php?lang=en
13. A list of museums in Poland is fragmented but some of them can be seen at: www.pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muzea_w_Polsce