

DOMINIKA KUŚNIERZ-KRUPA

ORCID: 0000-0003-1678-4746

Cracow University of Technology, Poland

JUSTYNA KOBYLARCZYK

ORCID: 0000-0002-3358-3762

Cracow University of Technology, Poland

MICHAŁ KRUPA

ORCID: 0000-0002-2199-0598

Cracow University of Technology, Poland

A GAME WITH THE PAST: DRESDEN'S ARCHITECTURE

GRA Z PRZESZŁOŚCIĄ NA PRZYKŁADZIE ARCHITEKTURY DREZNA

Abstract

This study is a multidimensional analysis (historical, architectural, urban) of selected examples of buildings and urban spaces in Dresden, which show how events and periods in this city's history have impacted its buildings and their surroundings. The analysis focused on architecture both as a consequence of the destruction during World War II and as a record of changes in the city's development related to the German Democratic Republic period and current efforts. It was aimed, on the one hand, at a comprehensive reconstruction and revitalisation of the city centre and, on the other, at pursuing new architectural forms. The findings point to a clear link between the stages of change in the city's architecture and its history and key historical periods, with a simultaneous and very clear desire to design thoroughly modern architecture.

Keywords: architecture, Dresden, history, transformations

Streszczenie

Celem prezentowanych badań była wielokierunkowa analiza (historyczna, architektoniczna, urbanistyczna) wybranych obiektów architektonicznych i przestrzeni urbanistycznych na terenie Drezna, pokazujących wpływ wydarzeń i okresów w dziejach historii tego miasta na budynki i ich otoczenie. Analizy dotyczyły zarówno architektury jako następstwa zniszczeń podczas II wojny światowej, jak i zmiany zabudowy miasta związanej z okresem Niemieckiej Republiki Demokratycznej oraz obecnych działań zmierzających z jednej strony do kompleksowej odbudowy i rewitalizacji centrum, z drugiej zaś do poszukiwania nowych form architektonicznych. Wyniki badań jednoznacznie wskazują na powiązanie etapowości przemian architektury miasta z jego historią i najważniejszymi okresami dziejowymi, przy jednoczesnym niezwykle wyraźnym dążeniu do projektowania architektury na wskroś nowoczesnej.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, Drezno, historia, przemiany

1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture and history, history and architecture – the two have always existed together and have had a direct influence on each other. Historically, past eras have always been identified with specific architectural styles. However, this rule began to evolve after World War II, particularly in recent decades, following significant political transformations. Today, we are faced with a multitude of forms and a highly diverse approach to and perception of architectural beauty. At the same time, we are surrounded by thoroughly modern buildings, which often reflect the completely different aspirations and aesthetic fascinations of their designers, as well as historical architecture, both boldly and conservatively modernised, and contemporary attempts to imitate it.

All of these phenomena are clearly visible in the architecture of Dresden, a city with a rich architectural tradition, which – due to the destruction wrought by World War II – is a field ‘for various interpretations of the architecture of the past’ and at the same time a space where thoroughly bold and modern architecture successfully exists and develops.

Dresden, situated on the River Elbe, is the capital of Saxony and currently one of Germany’s largest cities, with a population of 594,000. The city’s history stretches back to the early Middle Ages. However, one of the most intriguing yet challenging periods in its history is from World War II to the present day. This era can be divided into three main stages, each marked by significant events or periods that have had a direct influence on the city’s architecture. As a result, Dresden’s architectural style is diverse and distinctive, blending reconstructed Baroque elements with modern materials and contemporary design details.

The first of these stages in the period under analysis was World War II, which caused enormous damage to the architectural and urban fabric. The second was the reconstruction of the city under the German Democratic Republic, and the third was the period from the Autumn of Nations and German reunification to the present day, which saw economic transformation and intense multidirectional development of the city, followed by a period of peace, stability, and prosperity.¹

This prompted the authors to conduct a more detailed analysis of the nature of changes in Dresden’s architecture in relation to a selected period of its history and the significant events associated with it.²

2. OBJECTIVE, SCOPE AND RESEARCH METHODS

The aim of this study was to conduct analyses (historical, architectural, and urban) of selected examples of buildings and urban spaces in Dresden, illustrating the sequence of events and periods in the history of this city, and thus the inextricable link between architecture and history, their intertwining, and mutual ‘fascination’ or ‘aversion’ manifested in the form,

¹ S. Rassloff, *Kleine Geschichte der Stadt Dresden*, RhinoVerlag, Ilmenau 2019, *passim*.

² S. Veas-Gulani, *From Frankfurt’s Goethehaus to Dresden’s Frauenkirche: Architecture, German identity, and historical memory after 1945*, “The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory” 2005, no. 2, pp. 143–163.

proportions and details of Dresden's buildings. The territorial scope of the study covers the city of Dresden within its administrative limits, especially its strict centre (Altstadt).

The time frame, as previously mentioned, is the period from the outbreak of World War II to the present day.

The following research methods were used in the study: analysis and synthesis of the collected materials; urban analysis (including, to a certain extent, analysis of spatial, social, economic, and environmental conditions); archival and literature queries; the comparative method; the retrogressive method; and numerous site visits conducted between 2020 and 2025.

3. THE HISTORY OF DRESDEN AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD WAR II

The beginning of and events related to World War II permanently changed the architecture of Dresden. It should be remembered that the city was once one of the most beautiful and architecturally formal cities in Europe, sometimes referred to as 'Florence on the Elbe'.

Dresden's pre-1939 architecture featured several styles. It was primarily Baroque (German) from the 17th and 18th centuries. At that time, the city was famous for its rich, 'theatrical' Baroque architecture, which reached its peak during the reigns of Augustus II the Strong and Augustus III. The most famous examples from this period include the Zwinger, a complex of pavilions and galleries featuring sculptures by Matthäus Daniel Pöppelmann and Balthasar Permoser; the Frauenkirche, a monumental Lutheran church with an immense stone dome (known as the *Steinerne Glocke*); and the Katholische Hofkirche, a Baroque Catholic cathedral.³ Other styles worth mentioning in the context of pre-World War II German architecture are classicism and historicism associated with the 19th century. It was then that the development of downtown buildings and residential architecture in the spirit of Renaissance and Baroque Revival took place. Examples of architecture from this period include the Semperoper (an opera house designed by Gottfried Semper) in the Renaissance Revival style and the museum and gallery buildings around Theaterplatz and the Brühl Terraces. The historical revival period in Dresden was followed by a period of Art Nouveau and early Modernism, which lasted from 1900 to 1930. At that time, many Art Nouveau townhouses were built in the city, as well as a number of villas and Modernist administrative and residential buildings.⁴

In summary, the image of Dresden before World War II was that of a compact, historic city centre located on both sides of the River Elbe, with formal squares (Neumarkt, Altmarkt), wide boulevards and promenades along the river, as well as historic continuity of buildings that created a coherent cultural landscape.

³ D. Baganz, *Dresden: Kunst und Architektur*, Michael Imhof Verlag 2017, *passim*; D. Baganz, *Das historische Dresden*, Michael Imhof Verlag, Petersberg 2023, *passim*.

⁴ V. Helas, *Architektur in Dresden 1800–1900*, Vieweg+Teubner Verlag, Wiesbaden 1985, *passim*.



Ill. 1. Dresden at the beginning of the 20th century on an old postcard. Digital version of the postcard [in:] DHAAaCM Archive, FA CUT

Unfortunately, this situation changed dramatically during World War II. Allied air raids carried out mainly by the British RAF (Royal Air Force) and the American USAAF (United States Army Air Forces) on the night of 13–14 February 1945, destroyed 75% of the city's buildings, and the historic centre was almost completely razed to the ground.⁵

The authors described the period above as the first stage, which is analysed in terms of changes in its architecture, changes that were dramatic because they were sudden, unexpected, and far-reaching.

After World War II, a significant period in the city's history commenced (1945–1989). In 1949, the German Democratic Republic was founded, including Dresden within its territory. It was a socialist state established in East Germany, part of the Eastern Bloc and closely linked with the USSR. The GDR's economy was planned, centrally managed, and based on the Soviet model. The state owned most means of production, with a strong emphasis on socialist ideology in education, culture, and the media. The Berlin Wall, built in 1961 to stop mass escapes of GDR citizens to the West, became a symbol of the Cold War and reinforced the division between Western and Eastern Europe.

The third and final, very clear stage in Dresden's history is linked to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany, which occurred a year later, in October 1990. The reunification was preceded by the signing of the so-called Unification Treaty, under which the GDR was to be incorporated into the FRG as five new federal states: Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Brandenburg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia. After this event, not only in Dresden but also across East Germany, which had been under socialist influence for nearly forty years, there was a decisive change in almost all aspects of life. An economic, monetary, and social union was implemented, along with the provisions of the

⁵ S. McKay, *Dresden. The fire and the darkness*, Penguin Books UK 2020, *passim*.

former FRG constitution, an independent judiciary, and a multi-party system. State-owned factories were privatised or liquidated, and substantial investments were made in infrastructure, construction (including architecture), and culture overall. For the former GDR, including Saxony and its capital Dresden, reunification also meant joining international structures and, consequently, the opportunity to benefit from EU programmes and subsidies.

4. CITY BUILDING AND URBAN PLANNING: A REFLECTION OF ITS HISTORY

4.1. WORLD WAR II PERIOD

The events and periods in Dresden's history described above can be linked to specific changes in its buildings and urban planning.

World War II and the military actions described above inflicted extensive damage on the city's architectural and urban fabric – affecting around 75% – which had been developed over centuries. The city centre, or Altstadt, was almost entirely destroyed (Ill. 2). Baroque landmarks, including the Frauenkirche, Zwinger, and Residenzschloss, were especially affected. Consequently, Dresden's post-war image was one of ruins and debris, a stark contrast to its former splendour and prosperity.



Ill. 2. Dresden in 1945. View of the destruction in the city centre after the bombing on the night of February 13–14, source: C.N. Koontz, *1945 – Bombings of Dresden* [in:] Air Force Historical Support Division, <https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/1945-bombings-of-dresden/> (access: 25.07.2025)

4.2. POST-WAR PERIOD – 1945–1989

The period between World War II and the reunification of Germany began with a short, four-year period (1945–1949) that preceded the establishment of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). At that time, only some buildings were provisionally rebuilt, and the ruins of others, destroyed during the war, were removed. In 1949, Dresden found itself within the borders of the newly created GDR, which brought about major changes in the way people thought about the further reconstruction of the city and, consequently, about its architecture and aesthetics. The GDR authorities, influenced in almost all aspects of life, including architecture, by Soviet ideology, began to rebuild the city according to the models of Socialist Realism in the 1950s, with wide streets, monumental, formal buildings, often with classical elements. Socialist Realism was the official style in Eastern Bloc countries and combined monumentality, symmetry, and decorativeness to convey specific ideological messages.⁶

The architecture of Dresden during this period was also intended to emphasise the strength of the state, the role of the working class, and faith in the bright future of communism. Prager Straße is a perfect example of this. Rebuilt in the Socialist Realist style, it became a wide, formal thoroughfare (Ill. 3).⁷



Ill. 3. Dresden in the 1960s. View of Prager Straße on an old postcard. Digital version of the postcard [in:] DHAaCM Archive, FA CUT

Since the 1960s, Socialist Realist architecture in Dresden began to give way to Modernism, but in its industrial form, focusing on large-panel technology, i.e., the use of prefabricated systems (*Plattenbau*) for the construction of new architecture, which allowed for the quick and cheap construction of mainly multi-unit housing. It was then that large housing estates

⁶ S. Elmer, *Dresden Diary: Architecture, history and politics* [in:] A Communist in Hong Kong, 6.07.2018, <https://architectsfor-socialhousing.co.uk/2018/07/06/dresden-diary-architecture-history-and-politics/> (access: 12.07.2025).

⁷ J. Paul, *Reconstruction of the City Centre of Dresden: Planning and building during the 1950s* [in:] J.M. Diefendorf (ed.), *Rebuilding Europe's bombed cities*, Macmillan, Hampshire 1990, pp. 170–189.

such as Gorbitz, Prohlis, and Johannstadt were built in Dresden in the form of large blocks of flats with a minimum of architectural details (Ill. 4).



Ill. 4. Dresden in the 1970s. View of the Gorbitz housing estate, source: *Plattenbauten klug saniert* [in:] EWG Dresden, 2.05.2022, <https://www.ewg-dresden.de/bauvorhaben/plattenbauten-klug-saniert/> (access: 15.07.2025)

During the period in question, the historic centre, which had been practically razed to the ground during World War II, was rebuilt selectively and in stages. Priority was given to symbolic buildings such as the Zwinger and the Holy Trinity Cathedral (Hofkirche), while the former historic city blocks, such as those in the vicinity of Altmarkt, were mostly filled with new Modernist buildings (Ill. 5).



Ill. 5. Dresden in the 1970s on an old postcard. View of Altmarkt and the surrounding new buildings from the side of Kreuzkirche (Church of the Holy Cross). Digital version of the postcard [in:] DHAaCM, FA CUT

The reconstruction of the Zwinger palace complex in Dresden began in 1945, shortly after the end of the war. Initially, however, the work consisted only of securing the ruins against further destruction. The actual architectural reconstruction of the complex took place over the next fifteen years. The first rebuilt parts of the complex were opened to the public in 1951, and the entire complex was not completed until the 1960s.⁸

The Cathedral of the Holy Trinity (Hofkirche), which was also severely damaged during the air raids of 13–15 February 1945 (collapsed roof and vaults, burned interior), was gradually rebuilt following 1945. Work on the reconstruction and conservation of the partially preserved elements, including the nave, was completed in 1965.⁹ The historical and new elements in the structure of the building are distinguished by the colour of the stone.

In turn, the reconstruction of the Semperoper did not begin until 1977 and was completed in 1985. This was due to a decision by the East German authorities, which prioritised rebuilding residential and industrial infrastructure. Although symbolically important, the opera house was considered less significant, and its reconstruction was therefore postponed.¹⁰

This shows that the East German authorities were more focused on ‘new, socialist’ construction and less on cultural heritage, which is why many historical buildings were rebuilt very selectively – often only those that could serve as propaganda symbols. The turning point in this matter came in the 1970s, when there was a political need to show that the GDR was capable of ‘taking proper care of Germany’s national heritage’. At that time, for example, the Semperoper became a critical and prestigious project.¹¹

In the 1960s and 70s, Prager Straße, which had already been modernised once after the war, was redeveloped again. It became a modern pedestrian zone with hotels (e.g., the Bastei, Königstein, and Lilienstein hotels designed by Kurt Haller, Manfred Arlt, and Karl-Heinz Schulze) and shopping pavilions designed in a Modernist style.¹² Several buildings were also constructed during this period that remain symbols of the GDR era to this day. These include the modernist Kulturpalast building designed by Leopold Wiel and Wolfgang Hänsch, erected in 1969, which houses a large concert hall; large self-service stores (Ill. 6)¹³ and department stores, such as the Warenhaus Center designed by Ferenc Simon and Ivan Fokvari, with aluminium panel facades resembling honeycombs.¹⁴

⁸ C. Hertel, *The Pygmalion impulse in historic preservation: The Dresden Zwinger*, “Oxford Art Journal” 2011, no. 2, pp. 203–225.

⁹ *Kathedrale St. Trinitatis: Architektur* [in:] Dresden & Sachsen – Aktuelle Angebote, https://www.dresden-und-sachsen.de/dresden/hofkirche_architektur.htm (access: 10.07.2025).

¹⁰ krazin, *Semperoper Dresden* [in:] Architectuul, 21.03.2011, <https://architectuul.com/architecture/semperoper-dresden> (access: 11.07.2025).

¹¹ J. Paul, *op. cit.*

¹² *Prager Straße / Bauten von 1963–1970* [in:] Das Neue Dresden, <https://www.das-neue-dresden.de/prager-strasse-1963-70.html> (access: 15.07.2025).

¹³ *Construction history of the Kulturpalast* [in:] Kulturpalast Dresden, <https://kulturpalast-dresden.de/en/dates-and-figures/history/> (access: 10.07.2025).

¹⁴ T.M. Wolf, *Bautyp DDR-Warenhaus? Deutsche Warenhausarchitektur der Nachkriegszeit im Vergleich* [in:] Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 29.11.2012, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutschlandarchiv/147759/bautyp-ddr-warenhaus/> (access: 12.07.2025).



Ill. 6. Dresden in the 1970s on an old postcard. View of the Kulturpalast building. Digital version of the postcard [in:] DHaCM Archive, FA CUT

Summing up this period in Dresden's history, taking into account its architecture and urban planning, it must be said that it was subordinated, on the one hand, to ideology and, on the other, to social functions: wide streets were intended for parades and demonstrations, and housing estates were planned as self-sufficient units, i.e., with their own schools, kindergartens, shops, and green areas. It cannot be overlooked that, to a certain extent, historic buildings were neglected, as they were considered incompatible with the vision of a modern socialist city.

4.3. FROM 1989 TO THE PRESENT

The last of the analysed stages of coexistence and the influence of history on architecture is the most recent period. After German reunification in 1990, Dresden's architecture underwent major changes because the city, like other centres located in the former East Germany, found itself in a new economic, political, and financial situation.

This period, which lasted for over thirty years, was undoubtedly a return to the reconstruction of the historic city centre and historic buildings destroyed during World War II. One of the most important is the Church of Our Lady (Frauenkirche), whose reconstruction – in which every effort was made to use as many original fragments as possible – lasted from 1994 to 2005 and was preceded by a survey of the building's historical ruins (Ill. 7).¹⁵

¹⁵ E. Burger, *The Reconstruction of the Frauenkirche in Dresden* [in:] W. Jäger, C.A. Brebbia (eds), *The revival of Dresden*, WIT Press, Southampton 2000. pp. 141–164.



Ill. 7. Church of Our Lady (Frauenkirche) after reconstruction, photos by M. Krupa, 2025

The reconstruction of eight blocks within Neumarkt, with the main idea of restoring the historical, pre-war urban layout and the dimensions and proportions of the buildings, but incorporating contemporary details, technologies, and materials (Ill. 8, 9), is an immense project that is still ongoing. In 2001, an urban design proposal for this reconstruction was developed, specifying which buildings were to be reconstructed as faithfully as possible (these were buildings with a prominent role in the urban layout, i.e., *leitbauten*), and which structures should be adapted in terms of dimensions with the possibility of designing façades in a more modern aesthetic (so-called *füllbauten*).¹⁶



Ill 8. Construction work on the reconstruction of town blocks within Neumarkt, photos by M. Krupa, 2019.

The work related to the reconstruction of the city centre and the introduction of new architectural structures was not without controversy and numerous debates about the shape and aesthetics of the ‘new’ Neustadt. The dispute between supporters of a complete reconstruction of the historical appearance of the city and advocates of modern architecture was fierce, and in retrospect, it can be said that in the case of many buildings, a compromise between these two extremely different options was reached (Ill. 9).¹⁷

¹⁶ A. Clayton, A. Russel (eds), *Dresden: A city reborn*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2013.

¹⁷ N. Danilovic Hristic, N. Stefanovic, *The rebuilding of memory through architecture: Case studies*

The aforementioned dispute was accompanied by discussions concerning the commercialisation of the historic centre and the construction of shopping malls, such as the Altmarkt-Galerie, which was finally opened in 2004, as well as the introduction of modern details to buildings with historic façades, an example of which is the Dresden Transport Museum – Verkehrsmuseum Dresden – which operates in the post-war reconstruction of the Johanneum, itself a Renaissance building (Ill. 10), and the reconstruction and adaptation, also for museum purposes, of the former castle of the Dukes of Saxony – Residenzschloß (Ill. 11).



Ill. 9. Views of the reconstructed tenement houses in the city blocks within Neumarkt, photos by D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2022, 2025.



Ill. 10. Dresden Transport Museum – Verkehrsmuseum Dresden – operating in the reconstructed Johanneum, a Renaissance building, photo by M. Krupa, 2022

of Leipzig and Dresden, “Journal of Urban Culture Research” 2020, vol. 20, pp. 97–111.



Ill. 11. The former castle of the Dukes of Saxony – Residenzschloß after reconstruction and conversion into a museum, photos by D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2025



Ill. 12. View of the New Synagogue building in Dresden, photo by D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2024

Ill. 13. View of the Bundeswehr Military History Museum building in Dresden, photo by D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2022.

During the period under review, existing public and recreational spaces were developed and modernised, and new ones were designed, including promenades along the Elbe River. A new bridge, the Waldschlößchen Bridge, was also built over the Elbe, which led to Dresden losing its status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In the last decade, thoroughly modern buildings have also been constructed in Dresden. These include completely new buildings as well as bold adaptive reuse projects that target historical buildings. Despite their contemporary architectural vision, they often symbolise past events. In these projects, architecture becomes a bridge between history and the present day. Examples of these include the New Synagogue building completed in 2001, designed by Rena Wandel-Hoefer and Wolfgang Lorch, which was erected on the same site where the 19th-century Semper Synagogue (1839–1840) designed by Gottfried Semper had stood; and the Bundeswehr Military History Museum, which consists of two parts: an arsenal from 1877 and a modern part designed by American architect Daniel Libeskind in 2011. Here, the classical mass of the historic building was pierced by a stark wedge. The architects wanted to encourage visitors to reflect on the nature of war, its consequences, and our own potential for aggression. In addition, the architecture reflects the confrontation between the past and the present.¹⁸

5. CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary architecture, on the one hand, cares about the environment and uses new technologies and innovative solutions, while on the other it draws on tradition. Many new technologies are based on traditional solutions, offering them in a modernised form. The broadly understood place-based history is also becoming a value that builds a place's identity. Every city strives for development, but what can distinguish one urban centre from another is its local tradition and uniqueness.

Dresden's contemporary architecture combines today's trends with the richness of styles characteristic of past eras, emphasising the city's history. It is therefore proof that modernity does not have to be a contradiction of history, but can draw on it to shape the contemporary image of the city.

To summarise this discussion, it should be said that Dresden perfectly reflects the inseparable links between architecture and history, their coexistence, but on different principles, depending on the time and circumstances.

The architecture of present-day Dresden is remarkable, but at the same time extremely diverse, and treats history and tradition with varying degrees of attention, depending on the importance of the place, but also on the vision of designers.

The title's play on the past is a constant dialogue between architecture and history, a dialogue on many levels: doctrinal, aesthetic, and ultimately social and economic. Its consequences are new projects, some bold, some more balanced; some modern, some more steeped

¹⁸ D. Martynenko, *Makhno_architour: TOP-5 Dresden modern buildings* [in:] Makhno Studio, 10.12.2018, <https://makhnostudio.com/blogs/makhno-architour-top5-dresden-modern-buildings/> (access: 20.07.2025); *Military History Museum* [in:] Studio Libeskind, <https://libeskind.com/work/military-history-museum/> (access: 25.07.2025).

in tradition. However, they are all a reflection of the times in which they are created, and of the people – the designers who create them either independently or under the influence of external factors.

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Author's Note

Prof. Dominika Kuśnierz-Krupa BEng, PhD, DSc, Architect

Employee of the Faculty of Architecture of the Cracow University of Technology and the Chair of the History of Architecture and Monument Conservation. She specializes in the history of architecture, urban planning and monument conservation. She is an author of around 150 academic works, including five monographs, as well as numerous unpublished documents. She is an Expert of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage on the preservation of monuments; an expert of the Society of Monument Conservators; a member of the PKN MROZ ICOMOS, the Urban History Association, the International Planning History Society, TUP, Krakow branch of the PAN, MPOIA RP, and SKZ (President of the Krakow Branch).

dominika.kusnierz-krupa@pk.edu.pl

Prof. Justyna Kobylarczyk BEng, PhD, DSc, Architect

Professor at the Cracow University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, Chair of Shaping the Housing Environment. She is an author of numerous books and more than one hundred academic papers. Her research interests include: assessing the quality of the housing environment, sustainable development, the impact of climate change on the way architectural structures are shaped and operate, as well as the role of architecture in the public spaces of cities. She has also developed her academic interests in other areas, which include teaching, scholarly and creative work (in the field of design). She is an expert in many organizations and a member of societies; she is a member of the PKN MROZ ICOMOS; she is the chair of the Committee on Architecture and Urban Planning of the Polish Academy of Sciences. In addition, she is a member of editorial committees of a number of academic journals.

justyna.kobylarczyk@pk.edu.pl

Prof. Michal Krupa, BEng, PhD, DSc, Architect

Employee of the Faculty of Architecture, Chair of the Shaping of the Housing Environment. He is an author of nearly ninety academic publications, including two monographs, as well as numerous architectural designs of public, commercial and residential buildings, as well as designs of interventions in heritage buildings. His academic interests primarily focus on the impact of cultural heritage on contemporary urban planning and architecture, as well as research associated with his architectural, urban and heritage intervention designs. He is a member of: MPOIA RP, SKZ, Urban History Association, European Architectural History Network, SARP, TUP, SKZ, and the PAN Kraków Branch.

michal.krupa@pk.edu.pl