

Street names as a record of cities' complex histories

# Where the Streets Have No Name?



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**Each and every city bears unique marks distinguishing it from others, underscoring its distinctive history, culture, landscape, and character. The names of streets are an excellent case in point**

Every city's identity is marked throughout its space – both the natural landscape and that created by its inhabitants. The underlying topographic conditions – flat terrain, hills and embankments, bodies of water – fundamentally shape the city's appearance, while its buildings add another, complimentary dimension to create distinctive urban landscapes.

Old European cities, built in the medieval construction style, originally followed a nearly identical urban template, but despite their shared genesis such cities have grown and expanded to take on an increasingly distinctive appearance. The identities of cities constructed in latter centuries are likewise also marked by non-tangible, social aspects, such as the customs and lifestyles of their inhabitants. Such social identity-markers include the names of streets and other urban locations, which are the focus of this piece.

### The butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker

The primary and unquestionable hallmark of each city's identity is its name, most often remaining the same since the city's foundation (*ab urbe condita*). It usually reflects the city's genesis; in the Middle Ages, this frequently included the name of the founder or founders. A similar convention of naming cities after their founders or in honor of a prominent figure (the latter especially popular during the colonial era) has remained common until the present day. In Poland, a classic medieval example is Kraków (derived from the Polish for "city of Krak," the legendary founder). There are many analogs in English-speaking countries as well: for instance, the Northern English city of Knutsford takes its name from the Old English for

"Knutr's ford" after the 11th century King Canute; and, in more recent history, Pittsburgh, PA was named by General John Forbes in honor of the British statesman William Pitt. Another common convention is to include the name of the river on which the city had been built. Although down the centuries the origins of cities' names can become obscured by changing language and shifting population, they remain some of the most enduring marks of identity and are rarely subject to major change.



**Ulica Kamienna Schodki ("Stone Steps Street") is a well-known, distinctive Warsaw landmark**



Location of the long-gone Ulica Wodna ("Water Street") which once ran along the stream flowing through Warsaw's Old Town to the Vistula

From the earliest days, locations within cities – streets, squares, gates, bridges and so on – have also borne their own distinctive names. Such names reflect the local population's specific way of perceiving and shaping their surroundings. The system of urban toponymy has evolved over the centuries, comprising different types of names and the reasoning behind them. As such, each street's name reflects its actual properties; this could be its location (River Approach, Meadow Way, Brookside, Park Lane), cities it leads to (Oxford Street, Newmarket Road), notable buildings or venues (Churchway, Tower Bridge, Market Square, Fishamble Street), appearance (Willow Road, Broadway), notable people associated with it (Bond Street after Sir Thomas Bond, Temple Bar after Sir William Temple, Golders Green after the Godyere family), occupation of its inhabitants (Cow Cross Street and Cock Lane, both located near a livestock market), and so on.

### Medieval sources

If names of locations in medieval cities survive until the present day, they are an invaluable record of the city's history. The value of the original names is all the greater if they survive even though the locations originally associated with have faded into oblivion. For example, Fleet Street in London is named after the River Fleet, once a major river in the city,

eventually directed under ground and now fully subterranean. In Warsaw, Rybaki Street ("Fishermen's Street") is the only remaining trace of what was once a 15th-century fishing settlement on the banks of the Vistula. The name of the livestock market in London, Smithfield, evolved from Smooth Field, a large grassy space used for grazing in the Middle Ages. Similar examples can be found in most medieval and older cities throughout Europe.

A slightly different example comes from Warsaw. Nalewki Street was the focal point of the local Jewish population for so long that the people and their tragic fate have become synonymous with the district, to the extent that the origins of the name (after the River Nalewka) have long been forgotten.

As major cities continue to expand, the oldest areas tend to preserve their original names; this fact can be used to trace out the early medieval settlements including the initial topography, ethnicities, and occupations of the inhabitants, and other traces of the city's former life. Poring over maps reveals the cities' past secrets, with street names describing local architecture (walls, bridges, monasteries), landscape (rivers, ponds, hills), specific locations (towers, castles, gates), professions (brewing, fishing, baking, trading), notable inhabitants and so on. The recurrence of these types of names across scores of Polish and European cities is evidence of the

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universality of medieval naming, and remains a mark of their historical identity.

In more recent centuries and decades, the toponymy of city locations has not been as consistently expressive of the local identity. This makes it all the more important to preserve the oldest remaining names as non-material relics of a city's past.

### Abbey Road Street?

Over the ages, individual cities developed certain distinctive naming styles driven by the local language, history, politics, culture, social structure, and so on. They were frequently transient and affected by a wide range of external factors.

Between the 16th and 18th centuries in Poland, for instance, the naming system tended to rely on a set of nominalizing suffixes (*-skie, -izna, -szczyzna*) – many names were created in those days by adding such suffixes to the name, rank, social function, or occupation of the people associated with individual locations. Place names developed in Warsaw during that period gave the city a unique feel; however, the system fell into disuse in the wake of wars, partitions, and shifting ownership rules.

Another way in which names reflect the specificity of each city is the preferred local naming structure. The system common to the majority of Polish and European cities tends to rely on compound names with two parts; depending on the language, the “nominal head” falls within a relatively limited range (avenue, road, street, and so on), while the “modifier” is open and offers almost unlimited lexical options (Baker, Broad, Oak, St. John, and so on).

In British cities, local areas can be home to several place names sharing a common modifier; for example, names such as Cottage Garden, Cottage Grove, Cottage Lane, Cottage Place, Cottage Station, Cottage Walk, etc. can all frequently be found within a certain, relatively small geographical area. This system is especially common in London, giving the city a distinctive identity.

In English, around sixty individual lexemes exist that function as the nominal head in urban location names, including Approach, Arcade, Buildings, Circus, Circle, Close, Common, Cottages, Court, Mews, Square, Villas, Walk, Yard, and many others. In comparison, Polish naming structures are far more uniform, even though historically speaking, the language offered a far wider range of words that could perform such a function. In fact, Polish naming systems have not taken advantage of this lexical variety; instead, words that would have once been used as the nominal head of a place name are frequently incorporated instead into the modifier, thus resulting in largely tautological names (such as *ulica Przejazd* or *ulica Wybrzeże Kościuszkowskie*) – the effect might be illustrated with such hypothetical English examples as Abbey Road Street (instead of simply Abbey Road) or Strand Street (instead of the Strand).





Jakub Ostajowski

### New patrons, disappearing names

More recent history, from the 19th century onwards, has introduced a new angle to street naming: commemorative names rooted in symbolism, whereby a name doesn't reflect the location's actual properties, but instead turns it into a focal point for people or events who are to be remembered.

This has coincided with the appearance of two other trends, both effectively contradictory to the former, established system. On one hand, there is a tendency to regard buildings and locations as transient elements in the urban space, subject to potential major changes; this tendency is frequently exploited by administrative and political bodies to further their agenda. On the other is the ongoing expansion of commemorative names; they may commemorate people or events of regional importance (relevant or recognizable only in certain cities, regions or perhaps countries) or global significance (the same patrons would be replicated in names found in many cities in a given country, across the continent or the entire globe). As such, commemorative names do not play the same role in giving a distinctive mark to individual cities.

In today's times, only a few individual names or certain small clusters of them, associated with events specific to the given city or country, manage to accrue a genuine commemorative, metaphorical or symbolic meaning, and can thus be regarded as new urban hallmarks.

Warsaw is distinctive in its widespread use of names commemorating two national uprisings. The Grochów district is home to a complex of streets named after notable figures of the battles that took place there during the November Uprising in 1830-1831. In turn, various locations throughout the city commemorate significant participants in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising; alongside the recent creation of the Warsaw Uprising Museum, they have made an unmistakable mark on the city's landscape.

Distinctive, modern buildings are the latest type of urban landmarks becoming notable in cities across Poland. Reflecting the country's increasingly cosmopolitan attitudes, such places are frequently given English names (Mokotów Point, Platinum Towers, Green Lake etc.), marking a new shift in street naming in Poland. ■

#### Further reading:

- Handke K. (1992). *Polskie nazewnictwo miejskie* [Polish Urban Place-Names]. Warsaw: SOW.
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- Kasprzycki J. (1996-2004). *Korzenie miasta. Warszawskie pożegnania* [City Roots: Warsaw Farewells], vol. I-VI. Veda.

**Ulica Mostowa ("Bridge Street") once connected Warsaw's Old Town and New Town to the first permanent bridge across the Vistula, built in 1573**