



Review of the PhD dissertation by mgr inż. arch. Marta Smektała titled:

“Urban balcony: user needs, social and legal norms. Foundations for discussing the introduction of balconies into the courtyards of Wrocław tenements”

1) Background of the work

This dissertation addresses a timely and increasingly policy-relevant problem: how to reconcile heritage protection with contemporary needs for private outdoor space in dense European cities. Set in Wrocław, where late-19th/early-20th-century tenements constitute a substantial portion of the housing stock (and many dwellings lack balconies), the thesis contends that the current “energy-first” retrofit agenda – accelerated by the EU’s Renovation Wave – opens an overdue window to improve everyday liveability alongside thermal performance. The author argues that balconies, as liminal semi-private/semi-public interfaces, are undervalued by codes and practices that privilege façade composition and minimal compliance over usability, privacy, climate resilience and social well-being.

The background chapter motivates two complementary research aims. First, it investigates whether contemporary balcony designs and regulatory frameworks align with residents’ needs and lived practices. Second, it explores the feasibility of adding balconies to courtyard elevations of Wrocław’s historic tenements under spatial, legal and conservation constraints. To operationalize these aims, the dissertation articulates a mixed-methods strategy (literature and regulation review; non-participatory observation of 3,198 balconies across 13 estates; 41 semi-structured interviews with residents, designers, developers, administrators and conservation officers; comparative legal/institutional analysis for Poland, Germany/Saxony, Denmark and Austria; and 3D daylight simulations using Climate Studio). The overall framing is explicitly user-centred, evidence-seeking and policy-attuned.

Several features of the context make the case compelling. Wrocław’s tenement quarters feature large inner courtyards with untapped potential for balcony integration; yet modernization typically omits such additions, and regulations focus more on safety, overshadowing geometry and façade order than on everyday usability or resident adaptation. Meanwhile, international precedents (notably Copenhagen, Chemnitz, Vienna) demonstrate that balcony retrofits can be mainstreamed where institutions adopt collaborative, participatory conservation models and performance-based evaluation. This contrast helps position the dissertation’s contribution and provides an external benchmark for the recommendations.

2) Work content

Structure and methods

The dissertation comprises a synthetic monograph that introduces the aims, methods and findings and is explicitly built on five peer-reviewed articles, which together constitute the empirical and comparative backbone of the thesis. The data corpus integrates: (a) systematic observations (photographic and coded) of balcony uses and furnishings; (b) interviews with 28 residents and 13 industry/institutional actors; (c) a tabulated analysis of legal acts and house rules; (d) urban morphological analysis against Polish overshadowing/daylight provisions; and (e) daylight simulations to test the impact of balcony depth, balustrade type and orientation on interior illuminance/Daylight Factor.

The five published articles (content and contribution)

1. **Smektała & Baborska-Narożny (2022), *Buildings & Cities*:**
“The use of apartment balconies: context, design and social norms.”
Drawing on the 3,198-balcony observation and stakeholder interviews, this paper maps how design features (size, proportion, balustrade transparency), orientation and urban exposure (noise, greenery, courtyard vs. street) co-produce patterns of use. It demonstrates a persistent mismatch between supply-side assumptions (balconies as decorative leisure appendages sized for a café set) and resident practices (multifunctional use, privacy management, climate relief). Notably, the paper challenges conventional orientation preferences: on hot summer days north- and east-facing balconies are often more usable than south-/west-facing ones, underlining a climate-responsiveness gap in standard design logics. The paper provides actionable design cues (dimensions, privacy/shading, context sensitivity) and has garnered citations.
2. **Smektała & Baborska-Narożny (2025), *Housing Studies*:**
“Balcony use: value pluralism, house rules and social norms.”
This article interrogates the regulatory ecology around balconies (building law, civil/tenancy codes, house rules, warranties) and juxtaposes it with user needs and observed practices. It shows that formal rules overwhelmingly protect safety, aesthetics and façade uniformity, while usability, adaptability and privacy – central to residents – are barely considered. The analysis exposes how informal social norms often become de facto regulators (e.g., “acceptable” screening/planting), and explains why compliance is high for clearly justified safety rules but weak for vague aesthetic prescriptions. The paper calls for user-informed minimums (e.g., depth/area thresholds; provisions for privacy/shade) and better communication/enforcement architectures.
3. **Smektała & Baborska-Narożny (2025), *International Journal of Conservation Science*:**
“Local Approach to Heritage Housing Preservation: Potential for Adding Balconies to Tenements.”
A cross-country comparison (Poland, Germany/Saxony, Denmark, Austria/Vienna) of legal frameworks and organizational cultures of conservation. While statutory definitions of heritage are similar, implementation styles differ: Chemnitz, Copenhagen, Vienna exemplify

cooperative, stakeholder-engaged conservation (provisions for public interest tests, expert/financial support, shared responsibilities) that normalize balcony additions where context-sensitive, reversible and well-designed. In Poland, rules are not inherently rigid, but process frictions (fragmented ownership, longer permitting, limited collaboration templates) produce a status-quo bias. The paper recommends widening the value set (functional/social/environmental) and embedding co-design processes for retrofit.

4. **Smektała & Baborska-Narożny (2024), *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice: “Adding Balconies to Historical Tenements – Local Approaches to the Retention of Heritage Value in Poland, Germany, and Denmark.”***

Using Chemnitz and Copenhagen as instructive contrasts to Wrocław, this article details delivery pathways: owner-driven, bracket-mounted lightweight additions with transparency controls in Copenhagen versus freestanding steel structures with independent foundations in Chemnitz to protect historic fabric and enable reversibility. It also clarifies market-structural reasons why Wrocław deprioritizes balcony additions (high demand, urgent basic upgrades, administrative complexity). Policy lesson: success depends on clear procedural frameworks, standardized design patterns, and institutionalized negotiation mechanisms between conservation and market actors.

5. **Smektała (2023), *Architectus: “Exploring the potential for balcony addition to tenements’ backyard elevation in Wrocław – spatial challenges related to shade and indoor daylight illumination.”***

Through Climate Studio simulations on typical Wrocław room types and balcony configurations, the paper shows that for south/east/west orientations, balcony additions generally do not reduce illuminance below 300 lux and can mitigate glare/overheating (>3,000 lux). North-facing rooms are often under-lit even pre-intervention, suggesting compensatory measures (e.g., larger openings). It also problematizes prescriptive Polish daylight standards that overlook glazing performance/reflectance, arguing for case-by-case, performance-based assessments – especially in irregular inner-courtyard morphologies.

Synthesis of findings across the thesis

Across the five papers and the integrative chapters, the dissertation establishes that balcony usability is a function of design, context and norms, and that current typologies and regulations often fail to protect the values residents actually hold (privacy, adequacy of space, adaptability, thermal comfort). It demonstrates, via comparative policy analysis and simulations, that adding balconies to historic tenements is technically and institutionally feasible where participatory conservation and evidence-based tools are adopted. The work culminates in recommendations for design (minimum proportions, privacy/shade, orientation strategy), regulation (user-relevant minimums, performance-based daylight evaluation), and governance (stakeholder frameworks, streamlined permits, typology-specific guidance).

3) Assessment

Empirical scope and execution.

The PhD is anchored in a substantial, carefully executed empirical work. The systematic observation of 3,198 balconies, triangulated with 41 interviews and a structured legal/institutional review, provides an unusually rich and multi-scalar evidence base for what is often treated as a marginal design feature. The 3D simulation component adds methodological diversity and strengthens the argument for performance-based decision-making in heritage contexts. Overall, the empirical craft is solid and well documented, and the dissemination through five peer-reviewed papers in recognized international journals underscores scholarly quality and impact.

Nature of the contribution.

The contribution is primarily applied and empirical rather than theoretical. Its originality lies less in theoretical concept-building and more in documenting lived practices, aligning design with user needs, and building a practical case for mainstreaming balcony additions in heritage housing through institutional learning from comparable European contexts. The thesis excels at turning a diffuse, everyday spatial problem into actionable guidance for designers, property managers and conservation officers. It reads as research for policy and practice – a strength in terms of public value and likely real-world uptake.

Positioning and reflexivity.

The author's normative position is clearly pro-balcony – balconies are framed as critical to housing adaptability, well-being and climate resilience. This stance is stated and consistently advanced through the case-building, but it is rarely interrogated head-on. While counter-risks (e.g., façade clutter, potential daylight penalties, conflicts around public versus private space) are acknowledged, the argumentative asymmetry occasionally leaves alternative strategies (e.g., shared roof terraces, winter gardens, landscaped courtyards) under-explored or treated only briefly. A more explicit critical self-reflection on where balconies might not be the optimal solution – and how to adjudicate among competing spatial/heritage values – would have further strengthened the thesis' analytical balance.

Scope conditions and limitations.

The author is transparent about method limitations: possible observation bias (opaque balustrades, limited vantage points), potential sample skew in resident interviews (social-media recruitment favouring balcony-positive voices), and the need to empirically validate simulation results in situ. Additionally, the Wrocław-centric focus raises questions of transferability to cities with different ownership regimes, housing markets or conservation traditions. These are reasonable and manageable caveats, and the thesis appropriately points to future work on participatory conservation frameworks, balcony-elevator integration for accessibility, thermal-orientation studies and field validation of lighting models.

Overall assessment against the requested criteria.



- It is a large, thorough empirical study that has resulted in five peer-reviewed articles in recognized international journals, covering user practices, regulation/social norms, comparative conservation models and daylight performance.
- The research contribution is predominantly applied and empirical – its strength is in evidence, synthesis and practical guidance; it is less ambitious theoretically, offering limited new conceptual frameworks beyond the well-established “liminal/private-public” reading of balconies.
- The researcher’s pro-balcony stance is explicit and largely unchallenged by counter-positions; critical self-reflexivity is present but modest. That said, the exploratory lens on social norms and user practices is a real asset, opening up fresh understandings of how rules and everyday adaptations co-produce the built environment.

4) Conclusion

This dissertation makes a significant applied contribution to architectural/urban studies and conservation practice by assembling robust empirical evidence on how balconies are used, valued and constrained – and by demonstrating, with comparative and simulation support, how balcony additions can be made compatible with heritage retention. The work will be especially valuable to municipal planners, conservation officers, housing providers and designers who seek user-centred, performance-based, and process-ready approaches to retrofit in historical fabrics.

Its central strength lies in scope, methodological pluralism and policy relevance. While the theoretical yield is modest and the author’s pro-balcony stance could have been more critically triangulated, the thesis convincingly argues that re-centring user needs and institutional collaboration can unlock stalled potentials in heritage housing. In short, this is a carefully executed, practice-oriented PhD that delivers clear, evidence-based guidance and a persuasive agenda for participatory, adaptable and heritage-sensitive modernization.

The work fulfills the requirements for a dissertation and Marta Smektala thereby demonstrates her ability for independent scientific work. I recommend the faculty of architecture of Wroclav University to accept the thesis and continue the dissertation process of Marta Smektala.

Marie Stender

Senior researcher, Anthropologist, PhD, Head of Research Group
TRANSFORMATION OF HOUSING AND PLACES
Department of the Built Environment, Aalborg University