

RURAL ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE

– PROBLEM OF CONTINUITY

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Like other European countries Poland has developed over centuries its specific, rich and diversified tradition of rural cultural heritage, reflecting natural, socio-economic and cultural conditions. However, unlike European countries, this tradition was exposed to a number of destructing factors: partitions of Poland by Prussia, Russia and Austria (diverse farming systems and building codes), two world wars (irreparable losses of rural and urban heritage) followed by displacement of millions of Poles deprived of their roots (after the II World War). Finally the post-war totalitarian communist system introduced forcible industrialization, urbanisation and collectivization of agriculture. Rural habits, tradition and material heritage have been replaced by the urban lifestyle and urban, international patterns of buildings. (Policy of promoting typical building solutions regardless of regional tradition.) This coincides with the intensified at the last two decades of XX century process of uncontrolled, chaotic locations of individual houses and of new recreational settlements with disastrous effects for traditional rural settlements and landscapes.

Architecture and landscape - protection policy

As a reaction to the situation a protection policy has been developed to address the current problems of architecture and landscape, mainly using the concept of a 'protected area'. Protecting areas of natural and cultural values in Poland has a long tradition. It created a diversified system respecting the whole hierarchy of values, type and related protection measures. The most severe protection measures, concerning mainly natural values, are implemented in national parks and natural reserves. Another type of protection is organised in the form of landscape parks and areas of protected landscape, which are created to care for natural, cultural and landscape values on the local level. Both national parks and landscape parks are usually surrounded by protection zones preventing violation of the parks' substance from the outside harmful activities. The concern here is concentrated on preserving the natural landscape in current state. In the case of architecture protection of historical buildings *in situ* is generally preferred in Poland (provided that the owner is able to secure proper protection measures). However, for many of these buildings the only rescue is to move them to the open air museums (skansens). In both cases the national and/or regional conservator's offices decide on the range and type of protective requirements as well as supervise proper implementation of these rules.

However, current Polish situation poses a more fundamental problem of local tradition continuity which cannot be resolved by the mere protection policy. It is not only the problem of how to continue local building tradition but also the question of how to restore lost identity. This challenge equally concerns rural and urban population as the growing pressure from town people on recreation and tourism as well as building summer houses in attractive rural areas rapidly deteriorates traditional settlements and agricultural landscapes.

The key aspect is to recognise the revival of tradition as the bottom-up process in connection to real people and living culture. The preservation activity is not enough to provide continuity

and I would like to examine in this respect two regions in the Northern part of Poland in terms of the prognosis for the revival of rural tradition. It seems that cultural identity originates in the right relationship between people (as social group) and their cultural expression realised in activities (land cultivation, building crafts, rituals, customs) and built environment. How this is realised in relation to regional diversity? Regional diversity – does it have any deeper social meaning?

Regional diversity

The neighbouring regions of Kaszuby and Żuławy differ in every aspect of their natural environment conditions, landscapes, settlement systems and building tradition and history. The region of Żuławy is an alluvial lowland of the Vistula River delta, characterized by many depressions (nearly one third of its 2000 square kilometres territory). This situation makes constant threat of floods imminent, therefore water is a dominating element in making the delta's area habitable and productive as it has excellent agro-ecological conditions (due to fertility of soil). Highly sophisticated systems of flood control (dams and gates) as well as draining and irrigation (polders and pumping stations) have been developed during nearly 900 years. The history of colonisation of this region is marked by multinational waves of settlers coming from the areas of similar geographical conditions. The newcomers from Friesland and Holland, experienced in reclaiming and cultivating marshlands, have decisively influenced not only the farming, but also settlement patterns, building codes and the landscapes in general. The XIII century settlements were originally planned as large, regular villages with farmsteads concentrated around rectangular common place. The number, size and quality of farmsteads' buildings reflected prosperity of the settlers. In the XVI century dispersed "Dutch" type farms appeared with farmstead buildings lined under one roof.

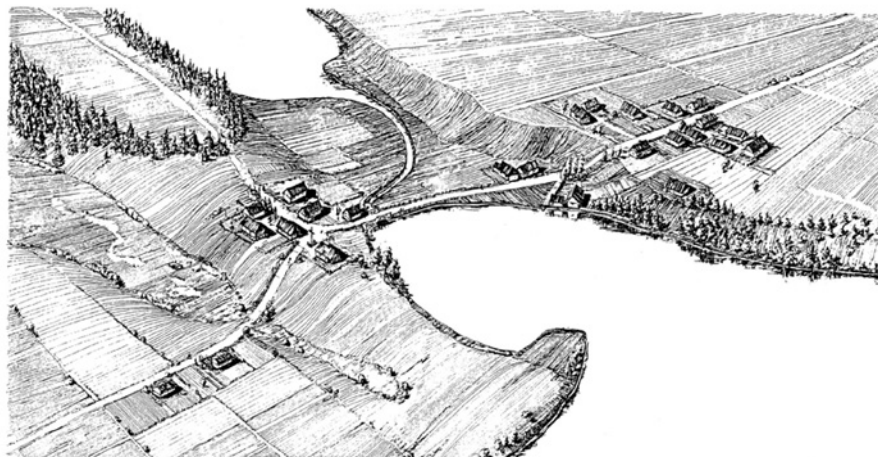
The region of Kaszuby, on the contrary, is geographically far more diversified. Most of this region was shaped by glacial process and its basic forms are moraine hills, numerous lakes and outwashes with relatively poor agro-ecological conditions. Agriculture, forestry and fishing were traditionally sources of income of the native population. The ethnic group of Kaszubians, still using its own language, created unique folk culture and building tradition. Diversity of topography is also reflected in the variety of settlement types and forms (irregular forms are dominating). Besides large XII-XIII century villages, small hamlets and dispersed single crofts appear as common forms of settlements. The built forms (villages, farmsteads and crofts) are carefully harmonized with the landscape. The houses and other farm buildings are simple and modest in comparison with those built in Żuławy. The Baltic Sea coast in the North of the region is traditionally inhabited by fishermen who developed specific settlement patterns and building tradition. Local materials – timber, stone and thatched roofs were widely used until the middle of the XIX century, later replaced by brick and ceramic roof tiles. Poor economic development conditions are compensated by picturesque landscapes, lakes and forests attracting mass recreation and tourism. This has become currently both a chance for the economy of the region and a threat to the building tradition and landscape due to uncontrolled and chaotic investment disregarding the cultural heritage of the area.

Social culture and its material expression

There is a link between people (society) and material world – what makes us call it material culture. "Buildings are among the most powerful means that a society has to constitute itself

in space-time and through this project itself into the future.”¹ The act of building, as a consequence, inevitably is a social act. Buildings are the social knowledge in themselves. They did not gain their form as a result of applying the same kind of laws or principles that govern natural environment: they originate as organised systems that through their spatial configuration express social order for which they were created and talk about its creator-designer (his culture and society). Built environment is a part of what Margaret Mead called “the transmission of culture through artefacts”². Built form – as human artefact – expresses social consciousness and culture and as the transmission of culture through artefacts, allows for re-creating social customs and cultural beliefs.³ These patterns vary from one cultural group to another. We handle these spatial patterns without thinking of them and even without knowing about it. This transition of patterns is almost by definition unconscious and appears (unfolds) in the different context. We only become aware of the degree of patterning in our own culture when we encounter another form of patterning in another culture.

The built environment is not merely the material backdrop to individual and social behaviour as it is often wrongly understood. It *is* a social behaviour, therefore it cannot be understood without concerning the ‘social logic’ of its generation.⁴ However culture functions non-discursively and makes the artificial (built environment) appear natural (like natural environment), so we cannot distinguish the difference anymore. We start to think about the purely natural landscape and the built one as they were the same. But they are not: they are governed by different generative laws straight from the beginning. Therefore they need diversified attitude to them: in the case of natural landscape – like the one in Kaszuby region – it is enough to recognise its value and protect the status quo generally leaving the nature to sustain itself. As the way of building here is not so much attached to the land, the location of new building is more free but asks for intelligent interventions as men are not the creators here: they use the natural environment.



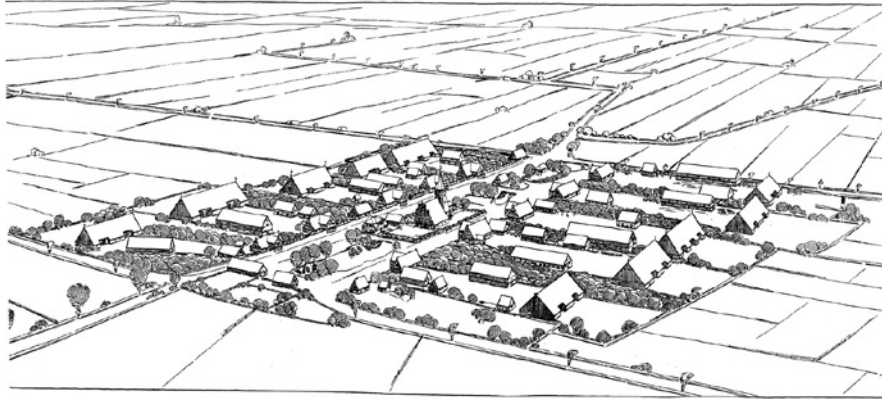
Picture 1 Natural landscape of Kaszuby

¹ B.Hillier, *Space is the machine*, Cambridge University Press, 1996 p.404

² M.Mead, *Continuities in Cultural Evolution*, Yale University Press, 1964, chapter 5; B.Hillier *Space is the machine*, p. 43

³ J.Shapiro *Fingerprints in the landscape. Cultural evolution in the North Rio Grande*, Space Syntax – I International Symposium Proceedings, London, 1997, 1:21

⁴ B. Hillier, J.Hanson, *Social logic of space*, Cambridge University Press, 1984



Picture 2 Constructed landscape of Żuławy

The landscape of Żuławy has been shaped over the centuries by human intervention (dams, canals, regular polders with irrigation, drainage and roads' systems) and this activity has been reflected in rational, geometrised forms. This purely constructed landscape requires more effort than just solely contemplation and exploitation. It calls for 'cooperation' forcing inhabitants to act as a social group in order to continue the process of shaping and maintaining the landscape form. Apart from cultivating, the flat land of Żuławy requires to be constantly looked after: continuing works on water canals, that protect the land from flooding. This kind of landscape, as a built form, shows how strong codes of behaviour can be reflected in landscape construction.⁵ To maintain the system, certain patterns of behaviour have to be sustained. That requires social discipline and responsibility of inhabitants that over the centuries was provided by the presence of the community of people attached to the land (they were organised in the so called 'Dam Union'). After destroying dams and flooding the whole area in 1945 by withdrawing German troops who evacuated the inhabitants, the continuous tradition of 900 years of this region somehow ended as its social and economical situation changed after the war. The reconstruction process of engineering works took nearly 20 years, yet the region has lost its wealth. Currently the situation is even worse as the area is no more populated by the same people. New farmers migrated from the east (areas currently located in Belarusia), or from the central part of Poland. They still do not form a close community what so ever and do not recognise built form as their cultural heritage. Kaszuby, on the contrary, kept this kind of tradition continuity (present in language, customs and material culture). That sheds light on the complexity of the problem of continuity in Żuławy (and restoring common awareness of cultural tradition of the region).

Rural architecture and its building tradition

This introduces into the discussion the problem of architecture itself. Can we associate contemporary rural architecture with traditional building (vernacular)? In the type of building called 'vernacular', we can see how the way of building within a specific cultural sphere is

⁵ Interesting example of cultural differences attached to the built form can be found in the studies made by M.Kowalska (Chalmers University, Göteborg, Sweden). She analysed two neighboring villages in the Tatra mountains (Białka and Nowa Białka in the South of Poland). They were founded in the different way and the built form as an expression of different social order (independent farmers and on the other side feudal peasants) reflects this difference of culture. The village that has less strict social codes is now much more spontaneously developed that the one with strong codes.

repeated so that the result of this building, the actual buildings, can be identified as representative of a local building tradition. Something in these buildings exists which reappears constantly, even if they are uniquely individual. Among vernacular buildings we can identify groups of buildings which can be clustered in the category of 'type' ('genotype') – for example semi-detached cottage or, in this case Kaszubian house. It appears in reality in the form of a number of unique buildings ('phenotype' as an exemplification of 'genotype'). The notion of type is difficult to grasp and point it out – as it is non-discursive.

What is important about vernacular building is the fact that it is a direct answer to local needs and values in the cultural context from which it emerges. "What makes vernacular architecture is (...) a cultural congruity of design, construction and use"⁶ In the vernacular the act of building reproduces given cultural (spatial and formal) patterns. This is why it seldom seems wrong. Architecture, in contrast, is taking into account different aspects of space and form in conscious and reflecting way. This process is not aimed at reproduction of the pattern specific to a given culture but occurs to be an act of creation where the question is to make a choice within a wide field of possible forms. It is difficult to talk about functional or aesthetic failures. Vernacular building has much to do with acting typical for handwork - where slow development of knowledge is based on proven experience occurring in a given social and cultural context. Proven solutions with a known outcome are transferred over time giving a good ground for the continuity of rural building tradition. The 'social order' in this case is given physical expression in the 'spatial order', while the spatial order supports the social order. This brings into mind the concept of living architecture⁷ where buildings are seen as a mirror of 'the self' reflecting what is live in the material expression of social or individual culture. This social logic is reflected in different building types by means of spatial patterns, building construction, decoration etc.

In the case of Kaszuby region, despite variations in primary forms, all houses share the same characteristics of simplicity: a compact form and simple rectangular plan layout. Development of house started from one-interior building with open fire (used even till the end of XVIII c.) towards four-chamber house which form originates in manor house of minor nobility. Houses usually have centrally positioned chimney allowing for good heating system and gable roof with the slope of 48° (with the exception of type C – 22° slope). Relatively short storey of 2 meters makes the form of Kaszubian house rather dumpy. Its little ornamented form is differentiated by means of additions, like annexes, porches, niches and arcades. It is possible to distinguish three main types of houses in Kaszuby region. The oldest one (type A) is a house with gable-ended arcade (from XVII/XVIII c.) later developed into variation with corner arcade (from half of XIX c.). From half of XVIII c. appeared second type (B): multi-chambered house with an entrance at broader elevation. The last type (C) is relatively new, developed at the turn of XIX and XX c.: two-storey house with low gable roof and gable dormer above symmetrically located front entrance. Traditionally houses were built using wood: log construction or mixed types (short logs with timber posts) and also timber-frame filled with clay and from the half of XIX c. also brick construction. Wooden houses traditionally had thatched roofs covered with straw or occasionally reed. Type C houses are covered with tar paper. Ceramic roof tiles became more popular when brickwork appeared in this region.

Houses in Żuławy, on the contrary, can be seen as an expression of complexity. The most common arcade house form – known as "dom żuławski" (Żuławy House) - was developed

⁶ H.Glassie *Material culture*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999, p.252

⁷ Ch.Alexander *The nature of order*, book one: *The phenomenon of life*, The Center for Environmental Structure, Berkeley, 2002

from the simple gable-ended arcade with granary at upper level and big drive-through vestibule/lobby (type I – popular in XVII c.) towards more sophisticated forms with T-shape or L-shape plan layouts (type II and III from XVIII c.). Enlarged by adding perpendicular part with living chambers these complex types usually have double-storey vestibule with a gallery. In the half of XVIII c. central arcaded part - originally used mainly for granary and as living area for farm workers – gained a new representative character. Farm facilities were moved to separate buildings and the house building started to reflect the wealth and special status of independent farmers in Żuławy region. Elaborated composition of timber frame, carpentry and decorative arcade forms were often inspired by current architectural styles, e.g. neoclassical, rococo style. Some houses are even known by the name of its builder-architect (e.g. Peter van Loeven). The oldest houses in Żuławy (type I) were generally timber-framed. Later (type II, III) first storey/basement gained wood log construction (and from the half of XIX c. also brick was used) while gables and upper floor remained timber-framed. The latest type of house in Żuławy is of different origin (type IV): Dutch settlers who colonised western part of this region introduced a simple elongated form of house directly connected with barns and other farm buildings in one line. (This form is not commonly known and associated with a vivid symbol of cultural heritage of this area).

The problem of contemporary rural architecture

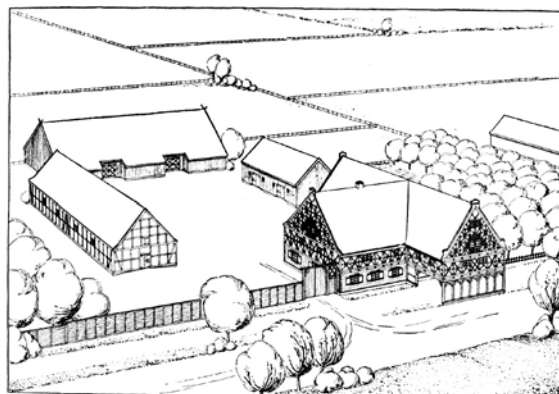
Apart from social change nowadays there is also a different approach to building tradition as such. While reproduction of traditionally passed-on patterns can be seen as typical for vernacular building, architectural way of building is different. It is concerned with innovation and formulation of new solutions. Design process is expected not to be repetitive and deriving ideas from older types of building (though to some extent it happens to architects as well in studies of precedents) but creative. Designing is a conscious choice among various approaches. However as a typical feature of rural architecture nowadays (or contemporary architecture in general) one can observe the lack of ties to a clear social context. In the case of houses in Kaszuby region current rural architecture takes the form of transferring ideas from a distant context (also in the meaning of common beliefs of what vernacular architecture is about) and applying a selection of visually recognised forms, characteristically elements, details in a new way. The architects' design choices seem to be purposeful and conscious but they do not emerge from deep understanding of a given cultural context but by means of borrowing ideas from other contexts or developing them along new principles... How to respond to the problem of building tradition discontinuity in the regions of Kaszuby and Żuławy in Northern Poland?

Reformulating approach to the problem of continuity

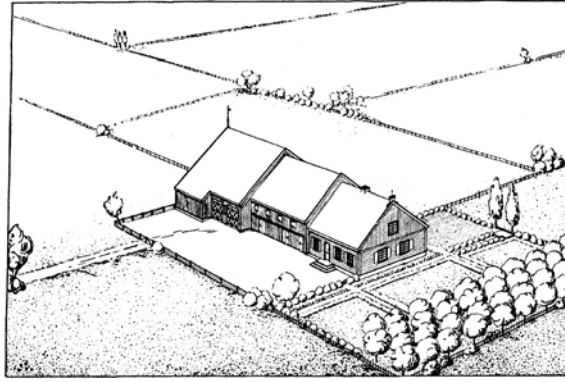
Having studied the regional diversity in relation to material and spatial culture and the dimension of social organisation in the case of compared regions it appears that there is a need of working out different approach to the problem of reviving local identity. Kaszuby represent the example of a living culture, where the local building and crafts tradition, though interrupted, can be revived and continued. The revival of tradition – though it may take some time – depends on restoring common awareness of the region's rich heritage and on supporting policy of promoting adequate building codes and good practice examples. This region requires careful research to study its origins, nature and evolution that can shed light on what actually is the phenomenon of Kaszubian building tradition. It involves the analysis of different aspects of built form (landscape characteristics, settlement types, farmsteads, buildings, materials and construction, proportions and details). Identifying common features -

as distinguished from specific local differences - means capturing the phenomenon appearing on the non-discursive level of spatial organisation and dealing with the problem on the discursive level which enables not only understanding the logic of this architecture and distinguishing its principles by architects but also using this knowledge to promote good regional design. Seen from this point of view 'typology' studies (followed by evaluation of types potential) appear to be a major part of rural tradition revival in Kaszuby region. This should be followed by the educational program aimed at helping people to recognise the rural built form as a part of their material culture and to identify themselves with this heritage. This education is meant to develop basic understanding of traditional rural landscape and architecture (including building layout, logic of construction and use of local materials, as well as heating system). The region of Kaszuby has the chance to be the one where 'good practice manuals' might be successfully implemented providing that architects get involved in the process and work in the region for the continuity of local rural tradition and not against it.

The case of Żuławy proves to be different. It is impossible to work for the continuation of traditional building patterns any more as they do not reflect the same social culture. This requires different strategy. The traditional buildings of Żuławy represented by the most recognised types of arcaded houses (type I-III) should definitely be protected as historic fabric (monument) relics of past culture. This means preservation of the building fabric (wood constructions, original detailing) and finding new uses so that it could be open to the public use serving as a place acting as a recognised local symbol and pride, integrating the local community at the same time (unfortunately many of those grand arcaded houses are in private hands or serve as communal housing: some of them are shared by a few families who do not care for the cultural heritage and transform the fabric as they wish). It is important to emphasise that this kind of building type generally should not be reproduced in new forms unless there is a real need for a building of such a scale and complex spatial configuration. The contemporary attempts of using this type of form end in creating deformed down-scaled versions of the original. Such architecture is no longer a reflection of a social order but merely a collection of visually most outstanding elements (e.g. arcades) put together in a completely new order that has nothing in common with the traditional context. In the case of Żuławy, first of all it is the landscape that should be protected as it cannot be left alone and re-naturalised (as a nature system it cannot sustain itself anymore). In terms of new rural architecture there can be no continuation of building tradition but it is needed to work out a new approach to architecture based on a type of building that as a spatial form is a more open pattern able to accommodate wider range of social patterns (using weaker social codes and more adaptable to new social patterns).



Picture 3 "Żuławy House" – nontransformable architectural form



Picture 4 Type IV house – transformable architectural form

As a potential source of inspiration appears the last type of houses in Żuławy (type IV) – the elongated form of Dutch origin. It seems promising as it keeps good scale and is neutral (fitting into the landscape and protecting the visual field in the space around) although deriving from the line of local tradition. Simplicity of form makes type IV building transformable: adaptable for innovation and contemporary functional program. The design choices in this case should not aim at designing pleasant buildings but living architecture acting as a contemporary reflection of people.