

THE PHENOMENON OF RURALITY

THE CASE OF POLAND

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Polish rural tradition

Polish culture for centuries was embedded in rurality - the culture of both peasants, noblemen and aristocrats. This tradition suffered heavy setbacks in the XX century. Its continuation was threatened by two world wars, mass displacements of rural population, territorial changes and unprecedented compulsory post-war migrations. The communist totalitarian system pressed on forcible industrialization and urbanization accompanied by the policy of collectivisation of agriculture. Traditional rurality and its cultural heritage was perceived as ideologically hostile refuge for backwardness, conservatism and religiosity. This policy, aimed at creating the image of the rural culture's inferiority, damaged or even severed the continuity of the values which people were till then proud of.

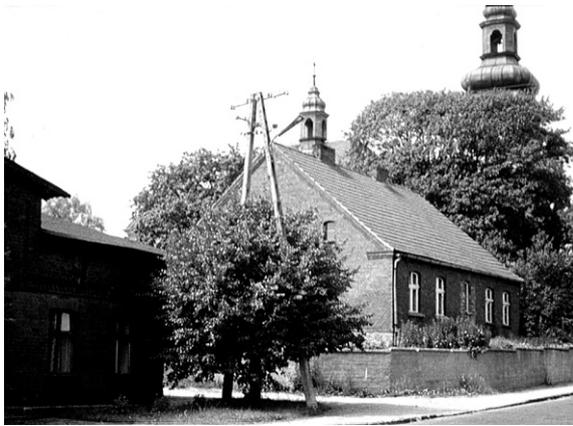
The transformation of the political and economical system in Poland, initiated in 1989, meant departure from extremely controlled and centrally planned system to another extreme of liberal market economy with private interest of individuals at the highest level of the hierarchy of values. This pendulum effect exerts strong impact on the behaviour of individuals, groups and communities. The cultural heritage, landscapes, historical places and historical monuments belong to the realm of public values. Public interest is subject to legal protection yet it has been sacrificed for the sake of the interest of individual. The cultural values are defeated when confronted with aggressive economy. The scale of rapid changes and lack of continuity lead to the loss of cultural patterns and archetypes, throwing individuals and communities "off their balance" in this respect. The indiscriminate search for novelties reflects the "syndrome of the late newcomer" characteristic for an imitative society.

In the meantime the retrieved values of the rural cultural heritage are quickly disappearing under heavy pressure of global consumption patterns and liberal market rules. The most attractive rural areas are exposed to the pressure of urban expansion both in terms of material, physical changes and of immaterial, socio-cultural transformation. The countryside is usually seen as a commodity for sale.

Recovering rurality

In the most of European societies there is growing interest in recovering their identity, forgotten in the urban life. It is focused on locality, searching for cultural roots, small homelands, homogenous communities. It is the re-discovered rurality, that seems to represent all these values, lost in an anonymous urbanity. In Poland this interest is relatively weak; paradoxically majority of the urban population are the first or second generation immigrants from the rural, then poor areas. For these new urbanites rurality was until quite lately associated mainly with backwardness, low standard of living, poor technical and social infrastructure.

There is a growing gap between two approaches to the countryside values. The first one is represented by the minority of those who understand and esteem its immaterial socio-cultural and environmental values expressed in the quality of the rural landscape, still integrating and harmonizing these assets. The majority perceives rural landscape merely as economical value of land and buildings, expected to bring profit on the real estate market. Many peasants sell their farmland piece by piece for construction of the new quasi-urban housing developments with disastrous effect for the landscape and natural environment. Under communist rule the importance of public interest was often abused to justify curtailing the rights of individuals. This explains why in the new democracy the concept of public interest still evokes suspicion of hidden unfriendly intentions. Now the rights of individuals expressed by private ownership of land became a supreme law for spatial planning with only narrow margin for public interest.



Picture 1. Two approaches to the rural cultural heritage – settlement structure



Picture 2. Two approaches to the rural cultural heritage – buildings

Legislation

The Act on Protection and Preservation of Historical Monuments¹ is fairly effective towards those buildings and other objects which are inscribed in a register of monuments. The effectiveness of protection through the rules of a spatial plan is rather problematic: very often the recommendations of the conservator's office to protect some historical values are challenged by local communities protesting against it as violating their interest.

¹ *Ustawa o ochronie zabytków i opiece nad zabytkami z 23 lipca 2003.*

Similarly uncertain is the situation of protected areas and protection zones (this concerns particularly cultural landscapes). Setting up culture parks, provided by the Act, is not fully effective due to the lack of adequate execution procedures. The rule of the Act imposing responsibility for proper protection and maintenance of a monument on the owner is very difficult to be enforced in the case of rural heritage. In most cases the contemporary users or owners of the historical buildings in the countryside do not have financial ability to preserve them in proper way. Only new owners, who consciously buy buildings of historical values are likely to secure their adequate protection and maintenance.

Towards strategy

The quality of the rural landscape in Poland is deteriorating with every year. How to avert this process as until now there is no clear concept for the development of rural areas and of the consistent development policy? What seems to be most important is the quality of the everyday built environment of the rural areas. “Everyday” means everything that has happened yesterday, happens today and will happen tomorrow, a flow of countless small investment and modernization activities of many individuals, fulfilling their everyday needs: homes, shops, storage buildings, summer houses and garages, roofs, entrances, walls, fences, gates, stairs, terraces, extensions or refurbishment of the existing buildings, using new materials, aluminium door frames, plastic windows, details and colours. The immense degradation process consists of these small scale interventions. Even more critical issue is associated with introducing to the countryside oversized buildings disregarding delicate rural landscape structures. Each of these components of the everyday environment affects its quality and should be confronted with local cultural heritage.

The situation came to the point in which whole concept of protection of the rural heritage has to be reconsidered. The problem of rural landscape and architecture can not be solved applying sectoral approach (non-consistent legislation and weak conservator’s institutions) and incidental good-will actions. As contemporary landscapes and architecture reflect more the type of economy and of consumption patterns than socio-cultural and environmental awareness, it is obvious that the strategy of protecting and shaping rural landscape and architecture must take into consideration much larger number of factors. Firstly, protection of the cultural heritage can not be separated from the inevitable development processes. Secondly, the strategy for rural areas must be based on the cross-sectoral approach, taking into account low socio-cultural and environmental awareness of their importance and the economical reality. In many cases further development or the restoration of landscapes is more important than ineffective preservation.

It is the urbanization process that contributes more than any other factor to the deterioration of the Poland’s rural landscapes. Therefore it is particularly important to find proper relation between town and countryside. The strategy for protection and shaping rural landscapes should be aimed at creating urban-rural partnership. This idea is strongly advocated by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) document². It is based on assumption that most of the local problems can not be solved without an integrated way of looking at towns and countryside; towns and countryside must share an integrated approach in order to achieve a balance between the various economic, environmental and socio-cultural interests. Hitherto the inequality of such partners results in the development of the town at the cost of

² *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP), Potsdam 1999.

surrounding rural areas, mainly in terms of indiscriminate exploitation and degradation of the countryside's assets (this concerns particularly the suburban areas)³.

The document states that rigorous protection measures, such as architectural conservation, can only cover a small part of cultural heritage and underlines the need for creative approach "to reverse in a number of areas the predominant trend of neglect, damage and destruction and thus pass the cultural heritage, including current achievements, on to future generations". It also pays attention to the fact that both natural and cultural heritage are economic factors which are becoming increasingly important for regional development; they are particularly important as precondition for the development of tourism.

The experience gained from the hitherto conducted research and studies enables to draw an outline of a method, which can be adopted in the process of shaping rural landscape. The starting point should be survey/recognition of the mutual relations linking natural and cultural landscape elements, which reflect the nature of a *sui generis* natural-cultural ecosystem. The next step should involve an analysis of its transformation processes degrading rural landscapes. Not only the symptoms of changes but even more their causes, particularly social conditions, should be examined. Only this can create a basis for elaborating solutions (proposals) for increasing control over the degradation factors and reducing their impact on the landscape.

This method however can not be fully effective without deepening understanding of the idea of regional architecture. Its spectrum has to be shifted from attractive yet superficial formal games to reflection on integrity of natural and socio-cultural factors which constitute the tradition of the places, followed by the case studies on the phenomenon of locality. Obviously it may restrict the liberty of architect's design process but it is the landscape quality at stake, far more important than architect's comfort.

Pilot projects can play an important inspiring role, although few isolated projects – irrespective of their recognized architectural values – can not avert immense degradation process of the rural landscapes. It is far more the matter of the basic quality requirements which every project and spatial plan has to comply with. The quality of rural landscape depends on the level of "mass spatial culture" (reflected in the location, settlement's and group of dwellings lay-out, building and its surrounding design) rather than on spectacular values of few separate objects.

This or any other method can be fully effective only if it becomes part of a comprehensive strategy for the development of the rural areas. Protection of the rural heritage can not be separated from shaping everyday environment. Both activities should be incorporated into one common, integral long term project. This project can become part of the sustainable development strategy⁴.

Professionals

There are two basic groups of perpetrators of the degradation process: [1] the average individual with his hierarchy of needs and values, with low awareness of the quality of the local cultural heritage and environment (developer, client, peasant, urban second-home dweller, tourist) [2] the average professional (politician, planner, economist, lawyer, architect), responsible for the management, development and shaping rural areas (landscape,

³ *Study Programme on European Spatial Planning. Conclusions and Recommendations.* Nordregio Report 2000.

⁴ A. Baranowski, *Urbanistyczno-architektoniczne problemy sprawności i tożsamości struktur przestrzennych metropolii trójmiejskiej.* Biuletyn KPZK PAN nr 189, Warszawa 2001.

architecture). The cultural patterns, which usually do not require any effort of understanding them, are more willingly accepted and assimilated. They are new toys in the global consumer's nursery. The patterns of contemporary architecture are subject of similar evaluation. As the notion of context and its role in architecture is generally incomprehensible, it is likely to be ignored when deciding on location and designing the form and surrounding of the building. Unfortunately, it is not only the client or developer that is ignorant. It is also architect or planner who often can be blamed of disregarding socio-cultural and environmental context in their work. The education curricula in Polish schools of architecture do not pay enough attention to the socio-cultural and environmental aspects of the architectural design.