

The Contemporary Rural Landscape in the South-Western Region of Poland (Sudeten Region) – A Search for Spatial Order

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Abstract. Architecture of rural settlements situated in the south-western region of Poland is distinguished by its vernacular character – the so-called “Sudeten architecture”. Characteristic features of this architecture are visible in pre-war buildings of Sudeten villages both in two-story and single-story structures and include pitched gable roofs, a wooden residential section and a brick maintenance section. Another characteristic feature of Sudeten villages, also called “chain villages”, is their homogenous layout, i.e. a detached but uniform arrangement of buildings. On the other hand, buildings which were erected in the southern part of the Lower Silesian province after 1945, which was a new economic and political situation, evolved away from the pre-war Sudeten vernacular architecture. With their randomly chosen architectural forms, flat roofs, concrete constructions, inappropriate colors and excessively dense arrangement, these new buildings introduced spatial chaos into the homogeneous structures of villages. Due to the landscape qualities of this region, it is important to establish precise rules for erecting new buildings in the existing context, and to popularize traditional architecture of the region (e.g. by organizing architectural contests for contemporary Sudeten buildings). Such projects could help residents to better understand the qualities of existing settlements and justify the requirement to follow rules when renovating and modernizing buildings. The purpose of these actions is to create new vernacular architecture for villages, which will both fulfill the requirements and needs of contemporary work and life, and also harmoniously complement the existing cultural and rural landscape.

Keywords: Corporate culture and/or country culture, rural landscape of Sudeten region.

1 Definitions

In his book, „From a Traveller’s Perspective” Stanisław Vincenz remarks that landscape functions both as a historical background and as the result of history. He adds that landscape is not merely an artistic or visual effect, but also the soil on which we tread and toil, the hills and plains, the waters, rivers and moors, the air we breathe: all these things shape the activity of human beings and their footsteps, work, arms and

legs, and their foundation [1]. On the other hand, Christian Norberg Schulz answers the question of what landscape is by stating that it is the space in which life of man takes place, the inhabited space between the earth and the sky. He notices that the act of inhabiting requires a place which has a distinct character and which enables living life to its fullest [2]. A description of an inhabited place underlines its features, which are a material expression of the culture of a given community, and, in effect, emphasizes such places as so-called architectural regions that share similar characteristics of development. A set of such characteristics (urbanistic, architectural, structural, or functional) assigned to particular areas is called vernacular architecture. Using this approach, the Sudeten were identified as a region in Poland with distinct characteristics of rural development [3].

The landscape is a dynamic system. Its functioning is determined by its components, the relations between them and the dominant processes [4]. In the case of areas with valuable characteristics of material culture, the notion of cultural landscape applies. The changing circumstances within this landscape determine its change and transformation, which in most cases consists not only in creating esthetic values, but also, or rather most importantly, in doing good and evil [5, p. 37]. Therefore, the most popular value these days, especially in rural landscapes, is spatial order, which is understood as doing good as opposed to the concept of spatial chaos, i.e. doing evil (Fig. 1, 2).



Fig. 1. A harmonious panorama of the village of Trzebieszowice with its vernacular architecture and dominating church tower (photo by E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2011)



Fig. 2. A chaotic panorama of the village of Oldrzychowice Kłodzkie ruined by high-rise prefab buildings located amongst single-story houses with steep roofs (photo by E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2012)

In areas with homogenous architecture erected before 1945, spatial order may manifest itself as the continuation of traditional characteristics, forms or spatial arrangements, which have been classified as valuable and worth preserving. Spatial chaos is the uncontrolled process of erecting buildings and other elements in their surroundings. The study of spatial order in areas where characteristics of traditional development have been preserved is carried out by researchers of material culture and architecture of such areas. The activities of architectural scholars have produced another notion of regionalism, which was coined by Władysław Orkan at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Initially this term referred to the cultural social movement aiming to stimulate the province, make it independent and to underline and respect its local tradition [6, p. 157]. In the 1970s regionalism was associated with the attitudes of opposition to uniformization and was considered a response to stereotypes and oversimplifications in spatial development [7, pp. 3-16]. However, regionalism vernacular architecture in this sense was often criticized because it frequently led to many forms which did not match particular areas and eliminated the traditional, often very valuable, characteristics of sub regions. Sometimes these solutions were also impractical and represented “imaginary” architecture, which disregarded the context of the place where these solutions were located [8, pp. 58-61].

The interpretation of the concept of regionalism should not result in a faithful reconstruction of old solutions or in the creation of open-air museum (Skansens). Only those actions should be considered that can produce architecture which is consistent with the surroundings and which continues the tradition of the area where the structure is to be built, but which also takes into consideration technological progress and meets contemporary needs. These issues are particularly problematic in areas where, after the Second World War, the political, administrative and economic system changed dramatically and where whole local communities were replaced and the cultural continuity was severed [3].

2 The Sudeten Region: Tradition and Modernity

The character of rural development resulted from the wisdom of local builders, who, for centuries, had been adapting the architectural solutions to the local environmental conditions, i.e. the climate, terrain, soil type and available building materials. This rural development was transformed in the spirit of that time, with the goal to meet the work and life needs of that day. The historical analysis of this development shows that subsequent stages of transformation were closely connected with traditional solutions and aimed at improvement without breaking the ties with the past. What resulted was the “continuity of rural architecture”, which is manifested in the progressive transformation of urbanistic, architectural, functional and cultural characteristics. This was also the foundation for the traditionalism of vernacular architecture, which resisted the impact of the rapidly changing new architectural trends [9, p. 170].

2.1 Sudeten Before 1945 – Characteristic Features of the Landscape and Regional Architecture

The Sudeten mountain range was constantly affected by environmental circumstances typical for that area (i.e. the mountain climate and terrain, type of soils and available building materials: stone, slate, timber, clay) as well as changing anthropogenic circumstances (political, administrative, economic, etc.). As a result, the rural (vernacular) architecture of Sudeten, which had been shaped since early Middle Ages, was fairly homogenous and uniquely combined a variety of influences, including material culture of Germany, Czech Republic, Lusatia and Poland. This architecture was ultimately shaped in the 18th and 19th centuries, and has many common features, such as: the type of settlement arrangement (“chain villages”) and characteristic types of homesteads – on farm land the so-called enclosed farmsteads with multiple buildings (Fig. 3), including a residential house, barn, and livestock pens. On the other hand, in mountain areas, where the terrain is diversified, single-story residential and livestock buildings emerged, which had all the homestead functions under one roof [3].



Fig. 3. Multi-house enclosed homesteads with an internal farmyard and a shrine at the entrance (Oldrychowice), (photo by E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2009)

The forms of these building are characteristic: elongated shape, tall, pitched symmetrical roof with a pitch of 45°-55°, identical spatial and functional systems based on the so-called Franconian house, in which the residential, utility and livestock sections were connected under one roof. Their floor plans are also similar with a centrally-located hall with residential rooms on one side and utility and livestock rooms on the other. Walls in the buildings in this area are also specific and the structures of external walls match the functions of the rooms: timber walls are used in the residential section, brick walls in the hall and livestock rooms, and trabeated or boarded walls in the utility and storage section.

The structure of the residential section (made of timber in older buildings) is a combination of different structures that exist in the Silesian region. The trabeated, stone and log houses are combined into one original construction, the so-called Lusatian half-timbered framing (German: Umgebinde), in which the posts surrounding the log wall of the ground floor support the trabeated upper floor and steep timber roof, or only the wooden rafter frame [10, pp.148-156].

These houses also have a similar architectural detail: a triangular, symmetrical gable with vertical boarding, characteristic wooden window bands and stone portals. This type of construction was built by the locals until the end of World War II (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Lusatian half-timbered houses, which combine all types of structures that exist in the Sudeten region: on the left – Sokolowsko, on the right – Olszyna Lubanska (photos by E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2007)

2.2 Sudeten – Rural Architecture After 1945

After the Second World War, Polish borders were redrawn and incorporated the so-called Western Lands where most of the development had not been destroyed by military operations. The fundamental social and economic problem in these lands is that the population was replaced, i.e. the local communities were deported west to Germany and people from the Eastern regions of Poland were repatriated to the abandoned towns. The misunderstanding and ignorance of history and material culture of these areas, and especially the different reality of post-war socialist economy, were the main causes of the gradual ruin of the local development, destruction of spatial order and, ultimately, the degradation of the cultural landscape of the Sudeten. In the post-war period there are four phases that depict the attitude of both users and authorities to the existing development, as well as the impact of political, legal and economic circumstances on the protection and conservation of the existing and emerging development [3], [11].

The people deported to the Sudeten region found themselves amidst a high economic and technological standard and a different type of development, which was adapted for: different methods of farming connected with cultivating large areas, well-developed tourism, craft (weaving), local services (taverns, inns, hotels) and light industry (logging, mining, small hydroelectric power stations, etc.).

The unfamiliarity of the existing urban, architectural and technological solutions, was detrimental to their usage [12]. The migrants adapted the existing spatial arrangements of Sudeten houses to their current needs. Most frequently, this was synonymous to the destruction of former functional systems of buildings, either by using only one section of the huge homestead, and thus letting the remaining area deteriorate due to lack of conservation, or by populating them with many families,

whereas when former homesteads were divided into smaller apartments, large rooms were partitioned, and multifunctional cookstoves, characteristic of this region, used for heating, cooking and baking bread, and connected with the so-called black kitchen, were demolished because they were difficult to fuel. After a period of uncontrolled management and use of the existing development, the construction industry in this area fell into stagnation, which was caused, on the one hand, by insufficient funds for renovations and modernizations, and, on the other hand, by the obstacles in erecting new structures. The former development was considered in this period as “culturally foreign”, and its original characteristics were eliminated and obscured by amateur renovations [3], [11].

In the 1950s it became impossible to continue the traditional features in new development due to new legislation, which rationed building materials, introduced building typification, and forbade the use of timber, steep roofs or individual designs in rural architecture. Typification of construction in combination with industrialized building technologies, based on prefabricated reinforced concrete, introduced into Sudeten villages cuboidal single-family houses, in the shape of reinforced-concrete cubes, with flat roofs covered with tar paper. Such architectural solutions brought chaos into the landscape of Sudeten villages. Additionally, they were not properly designed to be inhabited by the village people because their functional system was typical for an urban single-family house with a limit of 110 m² on usable floor area (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Typical single-family and multi-family development (Oldrzychowice Klodzkie 2012) (photo by E. Trocka-Leszczynska)

Due to the lack of proper construction supervision, many unplanned changes to typical and obligatory architectural designs were introduced nationwide, with disregard to regional diversity. Most often, the floor area was increased by adapting basements and garages for residential use. This caused an increase in the number of stories and, in effect, in the height of buildings, which stood out in the local landscape. Moreover, new architectural details were introduced in the form of “Italian” arches, baroque terraces with balusters and prefabricated fences or fences made of scrap steel from production of e.g. ice skates. This typification also pertained to high-rise multi-family buildings, which were built near State Agricultural Farms and had cuboidal shapes and flat roofs. The inappropriate scale and form of this type of development ruined the spatial order of small Sudeten towns [3], [11].

The need to build new houses was also common, as the people deported from destitute rural areas did not want to continue their own or local rural architectural traditions. A new villa-type stone house, characterized by vertical proportions, became the desired symbol of social advancement and of breaking ties with the traditional, poor, timber single-story “cottage”.

It was only in the 1980s, when postmodernism was developing in Europe, that “regionalism” was born, which piqued the interest of decentralized architectural departments in local architecture. This resulted in, among others, documents which systematized the solutions of Sudeten regional architecture.

Initially, during this phase, people built duplicable buildings, printed in catalogues, with features based on the so-called “mountain architecture”. In result, the following characteristics were introduced, which were foreign to Sudeten: very steep roofs, wooden rafters, and boarding of external walls and balustrades. Although these buildings were designed for the Sudeten region, they did not have any local vernacular features. They were rather features of “universal mountain architecture” due to their steep roofs and wooden details, which were introduced after the period of modernist cubes (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Homes from that period: on the left – a much taller house with an asymmetrical roof (Oldrzychowice), in the center – a house with a steep asymmetrical roof and arches (near Ladek), on the right – a house with a „mountain” roof and boarding on balustrades (photos by E. Trocka-Leszczynska)

Only after the political and economic changes in Poland in the 1990s came a significant breakthrough in rural architecture of that region. There was a boom in investments and in renovations and modernizations of the existing development, all of which resulted from the following: clearly defined ownership of buildings, access to construction loans, possibility to renovate and build houses based on individual designs, accessibility of building materials, and appearance of private construction companies. However, most of the renovations done “independently” by owners, without proper construction supervision and knowledge of local architectural features or local construction methods, in most cases led to the demise and disappearance of original local features (Fig 7). Very often, owners replaced traditional small-paned windows with “large” plastic windows, roof coverings with “modern and more colorful” ones, wooden walls with stone or insulated and plastered walls, and since recently, with walls with siding.

The 1990s brought a generation change – most of the buildings are inhabited by people born in the region – and a change in the awareness of the young people living in this area.

People started showing interest in the history of these areas and old development is no longer treated and “foreign”, but as “own”. Old buildings are also eagerly bought, e.g. as second homes, renovated and inhabited, and the renovations serve as examples of good practices and as encouragement for neighbors and designers.



Fig. 7. Amateur renovations: on the left and in the center – the wooden walls of the ground floor and gable have been walled up (Wlosien 2006), on the right– the wooden structure of the round floor has been walled up (Bratkov) (photos by E. Trocka-Leszczyńska)

Slightly different problems emerge in terms of designing and erecting completely new structures. The basic difficulty in the Sudeten region is that no one has developed any models for shaping contemporary regional architecture. The previous attempts to preserve old traditions in newly designed buildings have been mostly unsuccessful, unskilled and with their foreign form, proportions and detail (Fig. 8) and ostentatious colors, stand in contrast with the existing development [11].



Fig. 8. Newly built homes in the Sudeten region: on the left – a home near Swieradow (2009), on the right – in Jerzykow (2012) (photos by E. Trocka-Leszczyńska)

2.3 Continuation of Architecture in the Sudeten Region

The results of analyses show that the new buildings built in the region after the end of the Second World War, and in new political and economic circumstances, did not continue any of the features of pre-war architecture, but instead introduced spatial chaos into the homogenous Sudeten development. The first individual architectural designs in the 1980s were unsuccessful as they were not based on theoretical foundations and mostly had universal features of the so-called “mountain architecture”, which were borrowed from other areas. The architectural features of Sudeten were ruined by people who disregarded local architecture and irresponsibly implemented architectural features that are foreign to the Sudeten region, such as e.g. steep asymmetrical roofs, foreign architectural details. This whole process was additionally aided by amateur renovations and modernizations of old developments, which were carried out without proper construction supervision (Fig.9).



Fig. 9. An unsupervised extension of a 19th century cottage eliminated the original features of the house: on the left – the original form as of 1996, on the right – the same building as of 2012 with a new reinforced-concrete porch (Wilkanów) (photos by E. Trocka-Leszczynska)

The Sudeten landscape is also being invaded by architectural designs from various “catalogs”, which are erected in an unsupervised manner. This phenomenon popularizes structures, such as timber frame houses and log cabins, which are foreign to this area. Such buildings ruin the order and harmony of the Sudeten landscape by introducing, e.g. relatively flat hip roofs, thatched roof coverings, manor development (very popular in other Polish regions), or the very popular and structurally simple log cabins, which originate from eastern regions of Europe (Fig.10).



Fig. 10. Homes built from catalog designs: on the left – a „Polish manor” house, on the right – a timber frame house (photos by E. Trocka-Leszczynska)

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries one can notice a gradual rebirth of Sudeten architectural traditions. This is visible in the growing interest in both professional renovations and in the search for contemporary form of regional homes. For this purpose special architectural contests are announced, which are focused on the Sudeten region. For example in 2009, there was an architectural contest for “a Sudeten House with features of vernacular architecture of the Klodzko Land”, and in 2012, a “Contest for a conceptual design of a contemporary half-timbered house” (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Contest for a conceptual design of a contemporary half-timbered house – winners of the second prize (first prize was not awarded): on the left – team: Aleksandra Doniec, Agata Kaczmarek, Katarzyna Sobuś, Marcin Wajda, in the center – PAG Głowacki Architectural Studio, Wrocław; Tomasz Głowacki, Katarzyna Filipiak, Magdalena Ciszak, Magdalena Kornacka, on the right – Paweł Czeszejko, Katarzyna Antosik, Warsaw (photos by E. Trocka-Leszczynska)

The submitted projects are published in special catalogs and will help future investors to choose a design of a regional home which is appropriate for this area.

3 Conclusions

Theoretical design objectives can result from different approaches to the challenge of introducing new architecture into the existing cultural context. When searching for activities which could do good to the cultural landscape, what comes into focus is the concept of continuation of traditional architectural characteristics. Such activities, however, require that the elements which should be preserved and which will receive a new purpose in the landscape, be chosen objectively, without relying on personal preferences. What is also important here is the purpose for the survival of elements of the landscape (i.e. economical, historical, social, aesthetic values, etc.) [5, p 39].

A diversified approach to the existing cultural context, as well as the diverse cultural and historical values of existing housing complexes, determine how new development is built in their vicinity. New structures can either be copies of original solutions, such as open-air museums (Skansens), or can be inspired by local characteristics by creatively alluding to regional features, or can be negations by creating contemporary architectural forms, which are not related to traditional architecture.

Speaking of the continuation of regional architecture in areas, where ties with the past have been severed, one can recall the statement of Paul Ricoeur – It is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization [13]. Others insist on being critical in drawing from architectural history and taking into consideration the value of the context [14]. Others require that we do not directly draw from the context, but that a need of identity of place emerge, which seems a difficult and long-lasting process in the studied area [15, pp. 96-109].

By eliminating inappropriate trends, tightening the construction law, and raising the awareness of investors and designers it is possible to create contemporary regional rural development, which, on the one hand, could cater for the requirements and expectations of contemporary life and work, and on the other, could harmoniously complement and extend the existing rural and cultural landscape of the Sudeten region. Continuation of regional architecture requires special aid of regional architectural departments, i.e. their help in finding the right solutions, encouragement in pursuing them and special preparation and crediting for such projects.

It is also important to support the slow process of developing interest in old architecture and rebirth of Sudeten architectural traditions. Such initiatives are taken during, e.g. Open Days of Half-Timbered Homes, which are organized in Sudeten towns near the Czech and German border. At these events one can see properly made renovations or displays of architectural skills needed to perform renovations (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Open Day of Half-Timbered Homes, Bogatynia – popularization of the craft of joinery and a presentation of log carving for log walls (photos by E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2010)

The following are also helpful in this process: training of craftsman, especially in the difficult and somewhat forgotten craft of wood carving, special training for architectural departments and popularization of knowledge of local architectural features, as well as activities aimed at increasing the awareness of cultural values of the development in this region.

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