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Paper: Change of the image or destruction of the landscape?

The traditional villages of the Swietokrzyski - Region in Poland

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I like to give you today an idea about the changes in the architecture and landscape of the Swietokrzyski – village in the last 50 years, the last 10 of which brought the most fundamental transformations.

The developments, I would like to talk to you about, are symptomatically for the culture-landscapes of polish villages in the whole country. However, I would like to demonstrate them to you at the example of the Swietokrzyski - Region, and precisely, its northern outskirts, along the valley of the Kamienna-River.

The Swietokrzyski - Region is situated in the middle-east of Poland, western from Vistula-River; its landscape defined by the old and low Swietokrzyski-Mountains and conifer forests. In the city of Kielce concentrates today the industry and cultural life of the region. Northern from Kielce is the so called “Old Polish Industry District” situated, an important industry region of the 19th and the early 20th century, with its centres in the cities of Skarzysko-Kamienna, Starachowice and Ostrowiec Swietokrzyski, all of them located on the banks of the Kamienna-River.

The polish ethnologists avoid terming the wooden farmer’s dwellings in the Kamienna-valley as “traditional”, because of the fact that the country-side population of this region, through their close connections to the three early industrial cities, developed a new kind of construction and ground-plan, which to be sure doesn’t completely break with the older traditions, but shows many transformations due to the experiences, which the villagers made in the cities.

However, this “new” kind of construction is meanwhile 100 to 150 years old and since the beginning of 1960 not carried out anymore, so I dare to call it “traditional”, meaning the past political and economical context, in which it originated.

So, how does this construction manner actually look?

As I already mentioned, the Swietokrzyski - Region is strongly wooded; accordingly to this the wood was the cheapest building material available. All kind of farm buildings were constructed of wood, which was very often illegally procured.

The most typical form of the farmyard is the one of four buildings grouped around the square yard: the house facing the street, the barn situated parallel to the house, on both sides the stable and cow-shed and a shed for farm vehicles. High fences enclose the space of the yard, preventing strangers from luring inside.

The most spread type of the ground-plan of farmer's houses was this one, containing the small entrance-hall leading to the chamber and kitchen. Through the kitchen could the main room been approached. The entrance-hall fulfilled not only communicational functions, but also those of storage of household utensils. In the chamber was the food stored, the kitchen served as the main living space. Here was the food prepared and eaten, this was the sitting room for everyday guests, as well as sleeping space. The biggest room of the house was also the one, which was traditionally the less used. It was reserved for the most important guests; here was also the home altar been displayed.

There were no bathrooms in the houses.

The farmers' dwellings were mostly quite simply constructed: the walls of pine-logs were erected over some stones, which were laid loose on the ground. The logs of the corner-notched log construction join into pillars, which ram windows and doors in. The outer sides of the walls were sealed with clay and painted white, while the walls of the rooms were only painted. Two kinds of roof construction were mostly spread: rafter and purlin roof, the traditional roof covering was made of rye straw.

The duration of construction of this kind of house was about 18 days, by 2 carpenters.

In the 1920 a new kind of building ornamentation started to become popular. The front façade, and sometimes also the two side façades were covered with boards, which formed a base of vertical-, and a wall-zone of horizontal boards with a richly decorated ledge. The ornamentations of this kind, which are preserved till today, are of high handicraft standard. However, before the World War II only the richest farmers could afford to decorate their houses this way. After the war, this manner of adorning the house became more popular, however not that lavishly carried out anymore.

Apart of the boarding of the house itself, a small veranda at the front side of the house came into fashion. Used as an additional sitting-room or entrance-hall, the veranda was often skilfully decorated.

The interviews with the joiners and carpenters proved that till the first years of the 1960, there was still enough work for carpenters in the villages. They constructed wooden houses, which still leaned on the traditional models, although with some modern modifications. Since the beginning of 1960 only the joiners could find work, making new doors, windows, boarded façades and verandas. The times of wooden architecture were gone. Since then the number of wooden dwellings continually diminish. In 1957 30 to 60% of all dwellings in the countryside of the Swietokrzyski - Region were constructed of wood. Today, it is approximately 5 to 20%, only 1% of which is older than 1918.

Following I would like to describe the usual cycle of constructional changes to the traditional wooden house and the reasons, which lead to them.

The greatest problem of the traditional buildings was their immense require of maintenance. Although the wood itself has excellent thermal isolation properties, it is essential to secure the density of the joinings. Two times a year, traditionally at Eastern and Christmas the house needed to be sealed with clay and painted. Moreover, it was necessary to isolate the house additionally with straw for the winter. The straw-covering of the roof needed reparation after each storm or strong wind. But the greatest problem was of course the fire – the houses burned quite often, and it was highly unusual, that only one building in the village would be afflicted.

The problem of the proper isolation was easily solved by plastering the walls and the ceiling of the interiors. This manner started in the 1930, and became custom after the war.

The greatest functional necessity laid in an indoor toilet or bathroom. The refrigerator made the chamber not that necessary anymore. In almost all of the houses of the ground-plan type I presented to you before, we can find today a bathroom instead of the chamber. The necessity of more living space led in many cases to addition of rooms at the backyard-side of the house. Some of these additions are quite surprising, but their advance is, that they raise the living standards, but do not actually disturb the traditional village-landscape.

In the 1960 the burnable roof coverings of straw or shingle must have been exchanged by order of the authorities. The socialistic government aimed a change of the image of the polish country-side. It should become modern; there was no place for wooden houses with straw roofs anymore, although there were not many possibilities to choose as well. The only two materials, which were accessible on the market, were so called "etemit", intended to last forever asbestos-containing material, and roofing felt. The straw or shingle was in most cases removed and the new material put on the rafters. This was a grave and irretrievable change to the village-landscape, where so far the massive, high and heavy straw roofs dominated the settlements.

Moreover, there were actions taken by local authorities, to remove the unwelcome examples of the backward wooden architecture out of the countryside.

Luckily, the governments' intention of liberation of the village from the wooden architecture at all, remained unfulfilled, because of lack of financial resources. Nevertheless, it brought some strength into the popular conviction, that the wooden house was something, people should be ashamed of. This scheme can't be stopped or changed that easily.

Forty years later, the society still works on "improving" their environment.

First, the roof covering of "etemit" is being removed and new one, predominantly of metal, put on. Next, the old windows are being exchanged; the most popular models are made of synthetics. Today's another brilliant tendency is, if not to demolish, than at least to hide the wood.

This photograph I made in April this year,... this one, in August. As you can see, the perfectly preserved house is being packed in polystyrene; afterwards it will be plastered, to look probably like this... This procedure guarantees the acceleration of destruction of the wood, but no one seems to know about it.

Another popular way of modifying the appearance of the house is to support the old roof construction and to exchange the wall below by modern masonry.

To be sure, these measures are not being taken because of the buildings' lack of thermal isolation, but only to make them more beautiful and modern in the feeling of the owners.

A different problem is the kind of the new architecture, which spread over the countryside. This summer, I had on my field research in the Swietokrzyski-Region some German students with me, who could not stop wondering, why are all of the newer houses in the countryside so huge. This is a problem, which results from too rapid changes in the social conditions, which can not be fast enough met by architectural measures. The generation, which grew up shortly after the WW II could well remember living two or three families of up to seven people each, in a house of two rooms. It is still usual, that the families stay living together, up to four generations. So, to avoid the problem of extreme crampedness there were into the end of 1990 unnecessarily big

houses being built, which should provide enough comfortable living space for all family members. These edifices of up to few hundreds of square meters of usable floor-space break absolutely with the architectural tradition and context of the place. Moreover, due to the rapidly raising migration of the population out of the countryside, they provide today up to 80 % of unneeded space.

Often, the new house is being constructed that close to the old one, that the intention of its future destruction is quite obvious. Anyway, the grandmothers or grandfathers often refuse to live with the young family in the new house, so that the old one is being preserved from demolition as long as the elderly person lives.

On the other side, the nouveau riche from the cities discover the countryside and keep setting their palaces into the idyllic landscapes, bringing the already disturbed environment even more out of balance.

The demographical and social structure of the population changes rapidly, the traditional way of life disappears. Of course, no one will disagree: the modern houses are bigger and more comfortable and above all show the high financial status of the owner; nevertheless the wide spread denial of the value of the traditional wooden architecture and the indifference towards it can't be possibly understood nor excused.

The problem of maintaining the traditional environment in the countryside is of social and political nature. I have read many books, in which someone is complaining about the fact that the farmers don't think highly of their dwellings, which is quite understandably in face of a fact, how simple the living-conditions in the houses were. On the other side, there have not been taken any effective measures to change this situation. As I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, the scientist and authorities responsible for the preservation of monuments show only low interest in this newer kind of wooden architecture, there are no concepts about preserving it, nor laws to execute the protection of the village-landscape. There are as well no concepts about how to teach the country people to respect and to be proud of their own architectural heritage.

By the time being, it is impossible to persuade a villager, that these... could be more interesting or valuable than these...

A talented carpenter would still build for himself a house like this...

A farmer's house of 100 years of age has good chances to be converted into a modern manor...

And I was not allowed to document this house, just because it is "ugly"...

Please, don't misunderstand my intentions. I do not plea for maintaining an unhygienic, uncomfortable or backward style of life, but only for realistic solutions, which could be of use for the villager as well as for the traditional environment.

Let's have some examples: Spending holidays in the countryside becomes more and more popular, but I never saw a traditional house to be used as a holiday house for guests. No one would ever think an old building could be more interesting for costumers, than a huge, modern edifice, which would never give you an idea of spending your holiday in the countryside.

Of course, there are still some romanticists, who would buy an old building and use it as a summer house without doing to much harm to it, but these are rare exceptions.

Change and evolution are positive processes; the raise of the living standards is mostly welcome, but it is astonishing, how very few examples can be found, where the owner of the house,

rebuilding it, consciously tries to save and to display the original character of the building. I have to admit, I only found those two interesting examples.

About twenty years ago, Professor Ignacy Tłoczek wrote following words, meaning the on-going developments since the World War II:

“During the last years, alongside with the general rising of the living standards of the population, the expectations towards their dwellings changed as well. The demographical and professional structures of the polish village change fast, the correlations between the agriculture and the household are being loosened. (...) The villages are being taken over by new types of dwelling-houses, which are built for inhabitants not connected to the agriculture. (...) Shortly: the village is going through deep transformations. (...) The countryside becomes huge and uncoordinated construction-site, the construction techniques change, new building materials appear. (...) The chaotic, dispersed localisation of new settlements disorganizes the social life.” *End of quotation*

As I tried to explain, these processes did not got slower in the last years, furthermore became faster with the time. The preservation of the common architecture of common people has always been very problematic - because this architecture is so very usual to everyone. The day it becomes rare it will be too late to save it as an environment.

And by the time being the reality offers only two ways into the future for the traditional wooden house: the polystyrene or the ruin.

Thank you very much for your attention