PIOTR ŁODZIŃSKI[*]

SIMPLE HOUSES
THAT BUILD
THE IDENTITY OF THE TOWN

PROSTE DOMY,
KTÓRE BUDUJĄ
TOŻSAMOŚĆ MIASTA

A b s t r a c t

An inevitable process, which today affects small towns in the Podlaskie region, is the replacement of the traditional architecture with a new one. Towns succumb to the dominant trends, which go from the town centre to the province and slowly lose the towns' characteristics. The aim of the article is to show an example of simple residential architecture of historical-cultural values, which make the identity and character of a small town in the Podlaskie region.

Keywords: house, single-family houses, Podlaskie region

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Nieuniknionym procesem, jaki dziś dotyka małe miasta na Podlasiu, jest wypieranie tradycyjnej architektury nową. Miasta poddają się dominującym trendom, które z centrum spływają na prowincję i powoli tracą swój pierwotny charakter. Celem artykułu jest pokazanie przykładu prostej architektury mieszkaniowej o wartościach historyczno-kulturowych tworzącej tożsamość i charakter małego miasta na Podlasiu.

Słowa kluczowe: dom, zabudowa jednorodzinna, Podlasie

The identity of the town, which is its characteristic features that distinguish it from other cities, also refers to the architecture and is connected to the issue of the culture of building. It is one of the elements, which makes the residents identify with a particular place. The ties with the built environment, its views, distinctive forms and architectonic details have been formed over the years. The changes happening in space and time are the architecture of the town. Subsequent historical periods bring new elements, remove or replace the old ones. An inevitable process, which today affects small towns in the Podlaskie region, is the replacement of the traditional[1] architecture with a new one. Small towns also succumb to the dominant trends, which go from the town centre to the province and slowly lose its character. Andrzej Gawlikowski claims that, when organising the space in small towns, much more discipline is needed than in big cities, because of its "little and limited extent of land as opposed to the bigger ones as every investment, every object, every change of space influence the town and its character"[2].

The traditional image of small towns has been formed by the experiences of generations. In the past, small towns in the Podlaskie region and residential buildings were duplicated or at least modelled on existing ones. As a result, thanks to the repeatability of architectural forms, the entirety gave the impression of harmony. It should also be noted that the building of houses had to adapt to the local opportunities, associated with the building technology and construction materials applied. Both residential buildings and other elements of development were made of raw materials most available in a given area. For this purpose, characteristic and local building constructions were made. As professor Andrzej Basista writes "the use of local raw material always led to the kind of architecture and environment."[3] Of course, we are aware that there can be no uniform architectonic image of small towns in the Podlaskie region. It is diverse depending on the place. Due to the areas of coniferous forests, the houses were built of spruce and pine in most small towns of Podlaskie. However, in an area where there is a lot of field stone, e.g. in the area of Dąbrowa Białostocka, we can find building walls made of stone.

Intuition tells us that attachment to traditional architecture is characterised by the development of a small town; the large one is more open and susceptible to fashion and succumbs to it. Large cities are the cities of changes; the small ones show the attachment to tradition. The above, in my opinion, also applies to architecture.

Among the small towns of the Podlaskie region, well-known to the author of this article, a clarified example of the urban complex, in which simple houses form unique character of the town, there is Supraśl, located fifteen kilometres in the northwest of Białystok. Small towns located near much larger ones rarely manage to defend their identity. They are absorbed and overwhelmed. Supraśl emphasises its autonomy and identity also in the field of architecture.

Speaking about the sense of the local identity, in the case of towns, such as Supraśl, one has to bear in mind the town's history. The beginning of a documented history of Supraśl dates back to the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth century and is connected with the foundation of

---

[1] For the purposes of this research, traditional architecture will be understood as a manifestation of the heritage of past times and the attachment to the past, while the contemporary projects refer to the architectural heritage of past times.

[2] A. Gawlikowski, *Czy planowanie miejscowe może być skuteczne,* Państwowe wydawnictwo naukowe, Instytut Urbanistyki i Planowania Przestrzennego Politechniki Warszawskiej, Łódź 1988, p. 134, 136.

[3] A. Basista, *Architektura. Dlaczego jest, jaka jest*, Znak, Kraków, 2000, p. 24.

the monastery of the Basilian Fathers[4]. Until the early thirties of the nineteenth century, Supraśl had been only a monastery grange. The crucial event in the history of the town was the location of the textile industry in the Bialystok region. In 1833, Zachert – the owner of the largest Zgierz company – started to create the textile industry in Supraśl and on the leased land built a workers' settlement[5]. It was a complex of simple weavers' houses that gave rise to the urban establishment of the town. A regular arrangement of streets was constructed, intersecting at right angles[6]. Simple strings of streets were encased in freestanding buildings located at regular intervals. Buildings were set directly on the street with gables set parallel to it. (Illustration 1). In the urban construction, there was also a place designated for a market, which, until today, has not been fully constructed and is currently the subject of a reconstruction project carried out by the author of the article. Weavers' houses were built according to uniform model designs[7]. They were built on a rectangular plan with dimensions of 15.8 m to 9.6 m with a symmetrical structure of the interior. Economical functional structure consisted of four chambers and a hallway with the width of 3 m passing throughout the house, where the stairs to the attic were also located. One part of the house was a part for everyday living, and the other served the needs of business cottage industry. Mostly it had looms. The ridge height is about 7.5 m. These were buildings without a basement on a stone foundation, ground-floor with non-usable attic, with a roof topped with a gable profile jerking head angle of 40˚. The height of the foundation of a ground-floor ranged from 0.1 m to 0.3 m above ground. Front elevations were 5-axis with the entrance to the central axis of the hallway. The wooden, log cabin wall construction was made of logs cut into the crease and bleached with lime. In the corners of the building, there is a visible bolted joint technique with a dovetail overlay. Modular[8], wooden windows had symmetrical division into two wings, each with four square windows divided by three rails. Entrance doors with fanlights were made of rails with planking filling, laid in a geometric ornament (herringbone). The drawings on Illustrations 3 and 4 represent the example of the described weaver's house, made on the basis of this type of buildings, which are best preserved until today.

On the historical map of Supraśl[9], we can notice the repetitive rhythm of rectangular buildings, which indicates the standardisation and the use of common solutions to residential houses, forming a unified and harmonious character of the development. Houses were built

---

[4] M. Radkiewicz, S. Lewiński, *Kronika Ławry Supraskiej*, oprac. *Archeograficeskij sbornik dokumentów odnosiaszczychsia k istorii Severo-Zapadnoj Rusi*, t. IX, Wilno 1870, p. 1.

[5] K. Dumała, *Przemiany przestrzenne miast i rozwój osiedli przemysłowych w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1831–1869*, Ossolineum, Wrocław-Warszawa, 1974, p. 228, 298.

[6] Historical urban layout of Supraśl is consistent with the principles of planning structures of clothmakers' settlements that were built in the early nineteenth century in the district of Łódź.

[7] Patterns of model types of industrial estates and houses for colonists were transferred to the territory of the Kingdom of Poland by German engineers, that were guided primarily by the principles of economic, functional and practical construction planning for economic needs.
W. Ostrowski, *Świetna Karta z dziejów planowania w Polsce, 1815–1830,* Towarzystwo Urbanistów Polskich, Warszawa, 1949.

[8] F. Chodorowski, *Elementy architektury przeszkleń, Ewolucja okna na przykładzie drewnianego budynku mieszkalnego wsi Środkowego Podlasia*, Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok, 1996, p. 13.
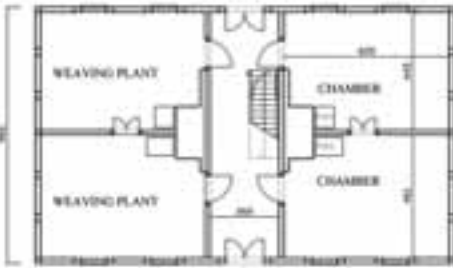
[9] The oldest known to author cartographic outlay showing the arrangement of the textile settlement of Supraśl in 1890 from the period of boom of the textile settlement preserved in the collections of the State Archive in Bialystok.

1

2

WEAVING PLANT

WEAVING PLANT

CHAMBER

CHAMBER

3

4

5

54

on both sides of streets. Typical rectangular plots assigned to artisans had enough surface area (1500–2000 m²) for the introduction of backyard vegetable gardens, apart from residential and economic buildings. As a result, Supraśl obtained large areas of greenery inside the residential quarters.

Until the First World War, apart from factory buildings of masonry constructions, the wooden housing building had been dominant. Although at the end of the nineteenth century, brick houses were being built, but what seems an interesting fact, new forms of architectural and functional systems were not developed whereas the solutions of wooden houses continued to be copied. For masonry buildings, there was a characteristic raw plastered surface of the facade of yellow and red bricks. A modest architectural detail was shaped by the use of different systems of bricks. For example, highlighting the window lintels and emphasising corners, cornices were done through extension and retraction of the layers of bricks and their various arrangements.

Building the Warsaw-St. Petersburg railway line at a considerable distance from Supraśl in the second half of the nineteenth-century influenced the fact that the town did not develop as much as Białystok, located 15 kilometres to the south-west. Supraśl lost its importance and now is a small town, located slightly off the beaten track. The interwar period brought no fundamental changes in the spatial structure of the town. Further expansion was a natural continuation of the urban arrangement created in the early nineteenth century. In residential architecture, we cannot notice the continuation of architectural forms typical of weavers' houses. Semi-detached and single-family detached houses, situated on the imposed building line, began to dominate. Newly built houses entered well into the historical structure of the town through a small scale, similar profiles of roofs and mainly thanks to the use of wood for the construction of buildings[10]. During this period, new solutions of finishing the facades of buildings originated. Due to the use of pitsaws in Supraśl allowing to acquire small sized timber, boarding of facades was introduced. Since then, a local tradition of shuttering the buildings has emerged. The characteristic system of boarding the elevation was a vertical layout in the space between the foundation and the windows, horizontal in the space of windows and herringbone on tops of the buildings. Simple architectural details of wood were started to be used – bands for windows and doors as well as corners and shutters.

Events of the Second World War almost completely destroyed the textile factories in Supraśl, but to this day, the entire urban layout from the period of the creation of the town was preserved as well as the whole strings of regular and orderly identical houses of the artisans. In the early post-war years in Supraśl, the building activity and the development

---

[10] An example is the workers' housing estate at Kościelna Street – a set of simple, identical twin family houses with gardens, that form a coherent compositional whole. It was a housing project funded by the municipality of Supraśl.

Ill. 1.   The author's drawing presenting 3-Maja Street in Supraśl.
Ill. 2.   Planting of the trees in the streets which is typical of Supraśl. Nowy Świat street. (phot. by Piotr Łodziński, 2016)
Ill. 3.   The ground floor plan of a typical home of a weaver. (drawing by Piotr Łodziński).
Ill. 4.   The front elevation of a typical home of a weaver (drawing by Piotr Łodziński).
Ill. 5.   The main street in the centre of Supraśl – ulica 3-go Maja. (phot. by Piotr Łodziński, 2016)

of residential architecture was stopped. New buildings were not constructed because houses abandoned by the Germans and the Jews were used[11]. Only at the end of the fifties, there were new projects, which initially continued the current form of simple, mostly wooden housing[12]. Then, the concepts of the so-called socialist architecture was built, which broke with the tradition of building in Supraśl. Buildings typical of the period of the Polish People's Republic have become the inevitable part of the landscape of the town. However, not many of them were created and the spatial order of the town was not changed. The measure of modernity and progress has become the substitution of the patterns of traditional architecture with new supra-global trends. All buildings constructed during this period differed from the canons of traditional architecture. The introduction of new building regulations recommending the construction of buildings of refractory materials led to a break in the traditional timber construction. Traditional corner-notched log constructions of walls made of wood were replaced by brick, while pitched roofs with ceramic tiles were replaced by flat roofs with tin or tar paper[13]. The houses were built on the basis of typical designs of forms close to the cube without distinctive architectural details giving them individual features[14]. Research in the field has shown that especially complements in the historical centre of Supraśl implemented in the period of the Polish People's Republic did not harmonise with the existing old houses of weavers. Imposing new facilities on the old urban arrangement with a different form and scale impaired spatial order. A striking and typical example of the so-called "parachute design" (a term coined by Professor J. Włodarczyk)[15] is a typical five-storey apartment block built in Supraśl in the immediate vicinity of the historical ground-floor buildings. Fortunately for the image of the town, the authorities did not continue this nationwide trend[16]. Thus, even though the building in no way fits in a disciplined arrangement of traditional buildings, it was not able to introduce chaos, and remained only a relic of its time.

After 1989, with the fall of the Polish People's Republic, in the period of social and economic transformation, the situation changed, which is clearly visible in the way of architectural creation. Today, on the outskirts of the town, new houses are constructed, based on the projects, which are promoted mainly by the nationwide catalogues with single-family houses. The avoidance of simply repeating forms can be observed in residential developments. In contrast to previous periods, designers do not replicate nor improve the existing patterns, but

---

[11] J. Szczykowska-Załęska, *Analiza planistyczno-przestrzennych problemów w architekturze miasta Supraśla*, Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Białostockiej, Architektura, Białystok, 1996, p. 10.

[12] That is the nature of a complex of a dozen family houses, built on the basis of a typical design, made in the years 1957–1960 at today's Juliusz Słowacki Street. Traditional houses were set with their longer side to the street. Rectangular ground floor was topped with a 45˚angle gable roof and a new element were glazed verandas located on the central axis of the front elevation as well as expanded, three-part windows, locally called Venetian windows.

[13] F. Chodorowski, *Charakterystyka budownictwa z drewna realizowanego dawniej i obecnie na przykładzie budynku mieszkalnego na wsi Środkowego Podlasia*, p. 105–118, Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Białostockiej, Architektura No. 17., Białystok, 1998, p. 110.

[14] Rows of typical, identical single-family houses locally known as "pillars" are found especially in the western part of the town in the area of Majowa, Wróbla, Wczasowa and Orla streets.

[15] J. A. Włodarczyk, *Oblicza architektury,* Rozprawy Naukowe Politechniki Białostockiej, 73/2000, Białystok, 2000, p. 161.

[16] A. Gawlikowski, *Czy planowanie miejscowe może być skuteczne,* Państwowe wydawnictwo naukowe, Instytut Urbanistyki i Planowania Przestrzennego Politechniki Warszawskiej, Łódź 1988, p. 134, 136.

try to create and implement their own ideas. The architecture of individual houses is diverse and stylistically inconsistent with the environment. The pursuit of individualism can be seen and isolation from the environment. This is facilitated by liberal rules limiting the design only by the line of the development and the scale of the facility. Certainly, such a state of affairs resulted from the monotony of residential settlements built in the years of the Polish People's Republic. Freedom and randomness in shaping the external form of architecture of the houses, often located in narrow plots in the minimum distances from the border of one's neighbour, as defined under the building law, suggests the observation that in the existing guidelines the specificity of the regional architecture is not taken into account[17]. Supraśl, a town with the most traditional architecture and still quite harmonious building designs, started to lose its characteristics as a result of randomly created architectural forms on the outskirts of the town. We can indicate a regularity that the closer to the centre of the town, where there the historical architecture predominates, the more spatial order is preserved, and vice versa the more peripheral architecture, the more order and uniformity is lost. Currently, a natural barrier to the spatial development of the town was formed by Puszcza Knyszyńska (Knyszyn Forest). Forested areas surrounding Supraśl inhibit further spread of the town to the outside.

In the historical centre of Supraśl, buildings, which date back to the nineteenth century, still prevail. Over the years, due to the long-term exploitation and a progressive technical degradation, most of the wooden historical buildings have been modernised and adapted to modern requirements. Corner-notched log constructions of walls were raised up above the ground level of about 20–30 centimetres and rotten foundations and beams were replaced, usually in parts under the windows. Walls were insulated with mineral wool and boarded in regional arrangements. Old roofing is more often replaced with ceramic tiles, the profile of which is similar to the traditional pantile[18]. The original multi-function arrangement lost its raison d'etre, now these houses are used only as residential buildings. The surface of lofts, which historically was not used, was adapted for residential purposes. Interiors were equipped with modern technical installations and the functional arrangement was adapted to current standards. Residential houses have a preserved steady rhythm (with few exceptions), and most of them are still characterised by traditional architectural forms (Illustration 5). The whole image is not blurred with few, mismatched complements and densification with new facilities implemented in the period of the Polish People's Republic and a few unsuccessful modernisations of weavers' houses. Still visible is the spatial arrangement of the former textile settlement, which constitutes, in addition to historical buildings, such as the Buchholtz Palace and a monastery, one of the elements of the continuation of the cultural heritage. Moreover, one more sign of the spatial identity of the town is worth mentioning, with its characteristic tree plantings on the streets in the town centre. Linden trees planted in the interwar period, and today regularly trimmed and shaped, create a unique atmosphere. (Illustration 2). This type of organising the green is continued by designers to revitalise the town streets, as recently with Kościelna Street.

[17] B. Czarnecki, *Nowe prawo, stare plany – przyszłość ładu przestrzennego w małych miastach*, Międzyuczelniane zeszyty naukowe, Year II, Wydawnictwo Akapit, Białystok, Gdańsk, Kraków, Łódź, Szczecin, Warszawa, 1996, p. 93, 94.

[18] A tile shaped as a lying letter S. The term coined by Mączeński, Z. *Elementy i detale architektoniczne w rozwoju historycznym,* Warszawa, 1956.

Currently, the town centre of Supraśl, under the conservation protection, is a simple, functional architecture, mostly residential, with a harmonised scale and form, which determine the spatial order and local identity.

The town image is affected by the urban arrangement and architectural forms created over long periods of its history. The author of the article shares the view of Dr. Andrzej Tokajuk that "the identity of the town consists of landscape features resulting from the topography and artificial greenery (the identity of the landscape), urban characteristics (urban compositions, construction method, public spaces), architectural features (facilities, material features), as well as the lost identity, which can apply to each of these elements"[19]. Finding the spatial identity of the town is the search for elements constituting its uniqueness, individuality and extraordinariness. In a world increasingly dominated by the international style of architecture and building technology, historical centres create a unique sense of place thus allowing to distinguish one town from another.

Owing to the fact that Supraśl is located aside as well as the lack of a dynamic growth allowed to keep a consistent and structured urban centre of the town, which is not influenced by foreign architectural trends. Due to the preservation of simple, modest residential buildings of historical and cultural values, which were rooted in the landscape, the town gained a unique and specific character. It is distinguished from other small towns of Podlaskie; it becomes the site of numerous visits and is attractive to tourists. However, it must be remembered that the identity is changing and is not given once and for all. One of the elements shaping the image of the town should be the protection of the spatial identity. Currently, the identity of contemporary Supraśl within the historical centre is not threatened. The apprehension is noticeable between new implementations and the existing structure. Complementary architecture is consciously shaped by urban-architectonic standards using instruments of spatial policy, implemented by the new local plans. The conditions for building new facilities are issued with reference to the local scale of construction and building traditions. The nature of the town is shaped consciously. This is proved by field research, which shows that the town is changing for the better. There are examples of low-key projects where architects prefer to refer to the past so that the new architecture is liable to and coherent with the historical context of the place and fully continues local traditions.

R e f e r e n c e s

[1]   Basista, A., *Architektura. Dlaczego jest, jaka jest*, Znak, Kraków, 2000.
[2]   Chodorowski, F*., Charakterystyka budownictwa z drewna realizowanego dawniej i obecnie na przykładzie budynku mieszkalnego na wsi Środkowego Podlasia*, p. 105–118, Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Białostockiej, Architektura No. 17., Białystok, 1998.
[3]   Chodorowski, F., *Elementy architektury przeszkleń, Ewolucja okna na przykładzie drewnianego budynku mieszkalnego wsi Środkowego Podlasia*, Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok, 1996.

---

[19] A. Tokajuk, *Próba identyfikacji elementów tożsamości miasta na przykładzie Białegostoku* – referat, konferencja „ Tożsamość miasta w globie globalizacji. Szanse i zagrożenia", Czerniejewo, 2006.

[4]   Czarnecki, B., *Nowe prawo, stare plany – przyszłość ładu przestrzennego w małych miastach*, Międzyuczelniane zeszyty naukowe, Year II, Wydawnictwo Akapit, Białystok, Gdańsk, Kraków, Łódź, Szczecin, Warszawa, 1996.

[5]   Dumała, K*., Przemiany przestrzenne miast i rozwój osiedli przemysłowych w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1831–1869*, Ossolineum, Wrocław-Warszawa, 1974.

[6]   Gawlikowski, A*., Czy planowanie miejscowe może być skuteczne,* Państwowe wydawnictwo naukowe, Instytut Urbanistyki i Planowania Przestrzennego Politechniki Warszawskiej, Łódź 1988.

[7]   Kalinowski W*., Zarys historii budowy miast w Polsce do połowy XIX wieku*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 1966.

[8]   Ostrowski, W., *Świetna Karta z dziejów planowania w Polsce, 1815–1830,* Towarzystwo Urbanistów Polskich, Warszawa, 1949.

[9]   Radkiewicz M., Lewiński S., *Kronika Ławry Supraskiej*, oprac. *Archeograficeskij sbornik dokumentów odnosiaszczychsia k istorii Severo-Zapadnoj Rusi*, t. IX, Wilno 1870.

[10]   Szczykowska–Załęska, J., *Analiza planistyczno-przestrzennych problemów w architekturze miasta Supraśla*, Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Białostockiej, Architektura, Białystok, 1996.

[11]   Tokajuk, A., *Próba identyfikacji elementów tożsamości miasta na przykładzie Białegostoku* – referat, konferencja „ Tożsamość miasta w globie globalizacji. Szanse i zagrożenia", Czerniejewo, 2006.

[12]   Włodarczyk, J.A. *Oblicza architektury,* Rozprawy Naukowe Politechniki Białostockiej, 73/2000, Białystok, 2000.