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## TRADITION, LOSS AND CONFUSION: COUNTRY AS THE IMAGE OF THE CITY – POLAND AFTER 1945

### Abstract

This article was inspired by the photographic project, *Underconstructed Houses*, which was completed in 2008 by two artists, Associate Professors Agata Pankiewicz and Marcin Przybyłko (both of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow.) Descriptions and commentary were made by the author of this essay. While the documentation of the project is still available at [www.underconstructed.pl](http://www.underconstructed.pl), the situation in the Polish countryside has slightly changed recently, in terms of forms tending towards tradition (albeit often misunderstood) and finishing with recently built or finished (in quite a shocking manner) houses. Still, the concrete, block-like constructions described are spread all over the country in a truly modern paradigm of progress. However, this article discusses further events – a bizarre symmetry of loss of tradition, still caused by bad, draconian laws, to put it mildly – both in the country and in the city.

*Keywords:* Polish manor, tradition, loss, legal confusion, country, city

### 1. Short introduction

This article was inspired by the photographic project *Underconstructed Houses*, completed in 2008 by two artists, Associate Professors Agata Pankiewicz and Marcin Przybyłko (both of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. Descriptions and comments were made by the author of this essay. While the documentation of the project is still available at <http://www.underconstructed.pl>, the situation in the Polish countryside has slightly changed recently, in terms of forms tending more towards tradition (albeit mostly devoid of fine regional differences!) and finishing with the recently built (or finished, yet in a quite shocking manner) houses. Still, the concrete, block-like constructions described are spread all over the country, in a truly modern paradigm of progress as it was understood by the Communist government since 1944–1945. The pictures of today's Poland were taken in various places, from south to north, and from east to west. A much shorter (and differently accentuated) account of the phenomenon was already published in 2011 as an essay in Polish, and is available online [http://archirama.muratorplus.pl/lifestyle/underconstructed-niedokonczony-raj,70\\_33.html#](http://archirama.muratorplus.pl/lifestyle/underconstructed-niedokonczony-raj,70_33.html#).

However, this article also discusses further events – a bizarre symmetry of loss of tradition, still caused by either too detailed and overcomplicated, or unnecessarily draconian laws – both in the country and in the city.

### 2. Underconstructed diagnosis

The artists called their objects *underconstructed*<sup>1</sup> houses – underdeveloped, and still under construction, even though they might already be partially inhabited. More-

over, some of them might remain unfinished – for financial reasons – for very many years. *Underconstructed Houses* was a perfect diagnosis of *hic et nunc*, at least in the year 2008, when the project was finished; that diagnosis generally remains current to this day. The above conclusion is certainly not original. The conviction that a farmer's house (or a peasant's hut) perfectly expresses the culture of his land was beautifully conveyed at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a seminal work by Kazimierz Mokłowski, a pioneer of both ethnographic and architectural-historical studies, in the former Polish city of Lvov. Mokłowski writes in the first part of his book, entitled, *A History of Folk Dwellings*: ‘It has to be observed that there is nothing in the content, layout, and terminology of a cottage that does not result from many years of development and that does not contain cultural strata, ones that became petrified over the ages. They were once a necessity of life in Poland, and thus they were our ancestors' life itself. Moreover, for the history of art and the art of building in our fatherland [...] the knowledge of a peasant's hut in its developmental aspect is simply indispensable’ [2].

### 3. Tradition

If ugly, dispersed houses are an expression of our present culture, then in due course, the so-called ‘turpistic’ (the term was coined by the great postwar poet, Stanisław Grochowiak [3]) poetry was a perfect expression of a world that was inadvertently mutilated and violated, first by the Second World War, and then by an imposed period of totalitarian rule. Moreover, ‘turpistic’ poetry is an absolute inversion of the traditional bucolic one. The Slavic penchant for the bucolic atmosphere was always proverbial. The Slavic paradise, our beloved *Arcadia*, lay in the Polish idyllic countryside. Charming rustic scenes were lovingly described by the great predecessors of Grochowiak. For instance, the Renaissance poet, Jan Kochanowski, famously praised the ‘calm and merry country’, quite in the spirit of Horace [4]. Adam Mickiewicz, the Romantic national

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<sup>1</sup> The original name of the project is indeed an English invention, cf. (online) homepage: <http://www.underconstructed.pl>, (date of access: 05.2014)

prophetic bard, wrote ironically: ‘We Slavs, we love bucolic idylls’, describing the penchant of men of letters to avoid the tortured reality of 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland under the tsarist heel [5].<sup>2</sup> Later, he also wrote:

‘Such were the fields where once beside a rill  
Among the birch trees on a little hill  
There stood a manor house, wood-built on stone;  
From far away the walls with whitewash shone,  
The whiter as relieved by the dark green  
Of poplars, that the autumn winds would screen.  
It was not large, but neat in every way...’<sup>3</sup>

These lines [...] give us an evocative image of the Polish manor house – *polski dwór*. There were thousands upon thousands of these residences in the villages and hamlets of the old Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania [*Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów*].

By and large, one style prevailed in their architecture [...]. A typical manor house was a one-storey timber structure, although the brewery next to it would often be made of brick and stone. The main building material was larch wood, which was once abundantly provided by Polish forests.

Timber houses easily caught fire and their place amidst ever older trees was taken by new ones, also of larch wood. These had similar proportions and layouts to their predecessors. A country gentleman’s house had to be made of wood. It is said that one Polish nobleman, who inherited a village in Tuscany, brought a Polish carpenter with him to his new estate, for he simply refused to live in a house of stone’ [6].

This predilection can indeed be understood in the light of the vernacular tradition, one that was prevalent since *tempi immemoria*. Two preeminent Polish architectural conservators, Professors Andrzej Kadłuczka and Jerzy Jasieńko, wrote:

‘Wood is one of the oldest and most traditional construction materials to occur in the territories of Poland. This is demonstrated in the case of Biskupin in central Poland: an early Slavonic wooden settlement, dating back to the close of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age (750–600 B.C.). It was discovered before the Second World War. It belonged to the so-called Lusatian [Lużycka] culture. Both the defensive and housing structures that were unearthed during excavations were constructed solely of wood’ [7].

It is noteworthy that in regions where wood was not so abundant, wickerwork mixed with soil was a traditional building material. Such was the case in the southeastern parts of the Old Polish Commonwealth – in Podolia and in the Ukraine. Elsewhere, from Lithuania through Podlasie, to Mazovia and Silesia, rural houses were built of solid wood, mostly in an interlocking manner (German *Blockbau*), but also in timber-frame (even though there were

countless regional variations) with thatched or shingled roofs. The same goes for churches. In the multiethnic and multi-religious Commonwealth, the great majority of Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox churches, as well as richly decorated synagogues and mosques, were built of wood.

#### 4. The loss

The gradual loss of tradition – already occurring during the partitions of Poland (by Russia, Prussia, and Austria from 1772–1918) and in the Great War – rapidly accelerated during and after the Second World War. One hundred thousand manors that once were situated in the expanses of the Old Commonwealth perished, leaving the sad one thousand that remain today. The Second World War left Poland deprived of more than a half of its briefly regained territory (including the two great historic cities of Vilna and Lwow; and six other major historic cities, seats of prewar voivodeships: Stanisławów, Tarnopol, Pińsk, Brześć Litewski, Łuck, Nowogródek.) All were seized by the Soviet Union, and all but the last are in today’s Ukraine. The war also deprived the country of two thirds of its cultural heritage, including the total destruction of Warsaw. Moreover, World War II resulted in the tremendous loss of more than a quarter of the country’s whole population. The genocide of the prewar educated classes, who fell prey to both the Nazi and the Soviet occupations,<sup>4</sup> haunts present-day Poland. In this context, one may indeed speak of the end of civilisation.

The little manor constructed of wood, the centre of the traditional Polish world and the epitome of its values, both architectural and moral,<sup>5</sup> fell prey to the two wartime occupations of Poland, and to the later agrarian reform in 1944. The reform was the final nail in the coffin for the surviving remnants of the landed gentry, authorising expropriation of estates exceeding 50 hectares of agrarian land without any compensation!<sup>6</sup> Only the smallest manors were spared [13]. These were quite often donated to the public by the last heirs (who could not maintain them.) Such a generous move also did not help their preservation; for instance, there’s the case of the manor house in Haczów, in Krosno county, a picturesque part of southeastern Poland (Fig. 1, 2). Very few larger ones were converted into museums, while the crushing majority of country houses rotted away, falling into complete ruin, and often used as mental asylums, storage for fertilizers, or even as pigsties. During the reform in the autumn of 1944 and winter 1944–1945, the country houses’ owners were usually banned from even approaching their houses within the 30 km radius, and from taking their belongings, including libraries, art collections, and furniture, which were

<sup>2</sup> Cf. interesting discussion of this subject in the book of the same title, *Slawianie, my lubim sielanki*, by A. Witkowska, PIW, Warszawa 1972, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> Fragments from the national epic poem, *Pan Tadeusz*, by Mickiewicz, written while in exile after the doomed November Uprising against Russia in 1831; here translated by Kenneth MacKenzie.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. but a few of the works on that horrible subject were published in English, and in the bibliography of this essay, no. [8]–[15].

<sup>5</sup> Cf. but one, aptly titled, publication – M. Rydel, Dwór – polska tożsamość [Manor – the Polish Identity], Zysk i s-ka, Poznań 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Dekret o reformie rolnej, Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego, Lublin 6 IX 1944, available (online): <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/DetailsServlet?id=WDU19440040017>.



Fig. 1. Manor house in Haczów, 1936, from the author's family archives



Fig. 2. Manor house in Haczów, 1994. Photo by the Author

all nationalised, confiscated, and very often looted. Thus, Stalin's personal wish to 'wipe away the entire class of Polish landed gentry' was duly – and irrevocably – fulfilled.

### 5. The progress

As a result of the agrarian reform, individual peasant farmers were endowed with a minimum of five hectares of land. Bloody collectivisation was spared, and there was no unspeakably horrible famine (as was the case in the Soviet Ukraine in the 1930s). Land was privately owned by peasants; also on the basis of the larger expropriated estates, the so called *PGR* – state-owned agrarian estates – were created. Social progress, so desired by the new regime, started and took its toll. First, in a country ruled officially by peasants and workers, industrialisation and urbanisation became the epitome of modernity. The scale of change was absolutely epic. According to several sources, in 1938, up to 70% of the population of Poland lived in rural areas, where, by 1998, the number had decreased to only 27%. [14] Houses started to look like shabby cubes of concrete. The author of this essay does not wish to recall the all-too-well-known story of Late Modern architecture. However, it is noteworthy that in the Soviet Block, progressive, prefabricated constructions started to appear often in the

countryside as solely 'politically correct' blocks of flats for the employees of the state-owned *PGR* farms.

The traditional, vernacular spatial layouts of Polish villages, developed over more than a thousand years – such as the chain layout, oval, street-like (along one street), multi-way (along a few crossing roads) and so forth, largely became illegible as well, along with the wooden dwellings that created them. These spatial layouts started to dissolve due to the construction of new houses, all equipped with modern comforts, and constructed of new, industrial materials on larger plots. The architectural paradigm became modernist and urban. It was a cubical, completely vulgarised architecture of the Corbusian five points. This happened even though the architectural prospects were clearly fine as the publication of the postwar year 1945, under the lovely title, 'Radiant Cottage, Radiant Village' in Polish *Skarpa* (the official journal of the BOS – Bureau for Reconstruction of Warsaw) had it. The author wrote: 'The concept of a dwelling is governed by an aesthetic and ethical factor: clarity, purity, economic utility are led to precision. A peasant that is equipped with such a modern, such a clean instrument, will start to like it and take care of it in the same way in which he takes care about a horse. A cottage is a perfectly precise device<sup>7</sup> [15, 16].

### 6. The anarchy: city in the country

Without falling into a conservative trap or showing too much nostalgia for the often rotten wooden huts with extremely low, or nonexistent sanitary conditions – it has to be stated that the official contempt for tradition and heritage, both in terms of building, planning, and values, was one of the crucial reasons for the visual disaster in the Polish countryside after 1944. Another reason was of course modern planning, or rather what was understood as such by the Communist government. There were no regulations requiring preservation of vernacular architectural forms, or forms that were derived from vernacular ones and that observed such categories as traditional alignment, height, proportions, saddle or hipped roofs, roof inclination, type of fences, etc. The anarchy and lack of discipline (admittedly one of the few Old Polish traditions that were preserved in the countryside, and certainly not the most glorious one), in spatial terms reigned supreme. The scale of houses, given total shortages in the centrally planned economy, is stunning – they were often much too large for the needs of a family, and frequently stayed empty on too many floors (while the family nested in one or two heated rooms in the basement, next to the kitchen.) Constructions were often abandoned when families emigrated abroad or migrated to towns.

### 7. Current situation: country and city, unite!

Later attempts to tame the spatial anarchy – after the liberal explosion of 1989 – came too late indeed, as the harm had been done. The introduction of new, more

<sup>7</sup> Translation by the author from the Polish version in *Skarpa*, [15].

sensitive spatial development plans is still far from completed. Only 30% of Poland has such regulations. The old ones, perhaps imperfect, but still professionally elaborated, lost their validity in the year 2003, due to the completely disastrous decision of the then Minister of Infrastructure, and the equally disastrous Act on Spatial Planning [17]. Moreover, the law still allows for the construction of settlements (cottages) on agrarian land of more than one hectare, which further deconstructs the traditional layout of a village and results in more spatial chaos and sprawl. Houses that were constructed after 1989, and especially recently, have more traditional forms, albeit often hypertrophic ones. Their forms often derive from typical designs in catalogues, and are unsuited to regional, truly local traditions.

What is interesting, the colours of houses have mostly changed. One may say that the formerly *underconstructed* houses became *overpainted* ones. The incredibly vivid, canary yellow, orange, even fuchsia-coloured houses (of course thermally insulated with styrofoam and coated with durable, acrylic paints), are the *dernier cri*. This fashion spectacle concerns both the cities and towns, and next to the sprawl, is another of the – alas! – unifying (but decidedly undesirable, from the author's point of view) elements of the country and the city (Fig. 3). The future appears to



Fig. 4. Manor house in Haczów, 2008. Photo by A. Pankiewicz

when the author visited it,<sup>8</sup> it was 'revitalised' by means of a rather bright yellowish paint and plastic-coated windows, while the wing added directly to the manor house's gable wall (after 1945) was derelict and falling apart; a stark contrast (Fig. 6). Of course the author appreciates the well-intentioned, if belated efforts of saving the architecture of the



Fig. 3. Overpainted houses in the suburb of Cracow, 2012, X. Józefa Poniatowskiego Street. Photo by the Author



Fig. 5, 6. Manor house in Lipinki, 2014. Photo by J. Huebner

be bright, if not in both senses, then at least in one. In case of historic structures, even listed ones, the new mania of colour is often called 'revitalisation'. Indeed, one may hope that some houses remain *underconstructed*, like the 'reconstructed' manor in Haczów (Fig. 4). Otherwise they may end up like another manor in the area – in Lipinki, near Biecz, formerly owned by the Byszewski family. The once-beautiful, neo-classical manor house stands alone in a completely disfigured park, which is partly poured-over with concrete and tarmac, partly developed with local shops or a bus stop, and deprived of its classic layout. The majority of once-carefully planted, often exotic trees were cut. The manor house is now a communal welfare and daycare centre for the disabled. In July 2014, however,

<sup>8</sup> The studies in situ took place exactly on the 70th anniversary of the Manifesto of the Temporary Government in Lublin, one introducing the Communist regime in Poland.

house itself, yet the entire manorial park and the culture of the manor are, needless to say, irrevocably destroyed.

The prevailing sense of isolation and brutal contrast of postwar houses to the surrounding landscape remains in the countryside, heightened by the attack of the extreme, nontraditional colours or plastic siding – as well as a dose of contempt for local laws, even if they exist and make sense. Moreover, upon joining the EU, and the advent of generous agricultural subsidies, a construction boom began in 2004. Adam Zamoyski, a noted historian and descendant of one of the old, merited Polish families, aptly noted (if very sadly) a few yet unspoiled spots within the historic rural architecture: ‘Unfortunately, these remnants often stand in a cultural desert, surrounded by ugliness and aesthetic insensitivity. There are very few places in Poland where an ensemble survives, as they do in so many parts of western Europe’ [18].

### 8. A strange reflection: verdure in the city

The complete loss of the tradition of inhabited country houses – with their parks and gardens, along with tree-lined avenues, *court d'honneur* with flower beds, ivy and vine overgrowing the facades; and with ponds, old arboreta, follies, orangeries and chapels – is so cruelly visible, not only in Haczów or Lipinki, but in other places far too numerous to mention. This heritage disaster, itself the obvious diametrical opposite of any sustainable development – as well as the transformation of the habits of the country population – have a strangely symmetrical effect in the city. The loss of the great tradition of gardening and the laying out of parks, which was once literally in blossom in a country as fertile as Poland, is evident also in Polish cities.

Again, the reasons, according to many urban planners and architects, are mainly legal, but also cultural. The aforementioned Act on Spatial Planning, itself written in an overtly complicated manner, mainly focuses on procedures and is followed by many regulations. It does not refer to the laying out of public green urban spaces or planting trees at all. This, again, is a far cry from the pre-war legislation, which was written in a concise, lucid manner, and literally dealt with the issue in a few sentences – and did so effectively. One speaks here of the Regulation of the President of Poland in the year 1928 (19), which regulated both building law and spatial planning. The Regulation foresaw the obligatory planting of trees at any newly laid out street and the adequate ratio of public green areas.<sup>9</sup>

There are many examples of housing estates, and indeed entire districts, laid out in this manner, notably the *Osiedla Oficerskie* – Officers’ Housing Estates in Cracow and Lwow (laid out according to plans by famed urban planner, Professor Ignacy Drexler<sup>10</sup>). In the latter, even the streets

derived their names from the planted varieties of trees (the main street of this enchanting urban complex was called *Czereśniowa* – Cherry Street). The same was true even in the case of industrial complexes with housing estates – for instance in Mościce near Tarnów, where the State Nitrogen Works were founded in the late 1920s, with the expansive housing estate in the park, and with streets such as *Jarzębinowa* (Rowan) and *Klonowa* (Maple) Street. Thus the Howardian idea of garden cities was indeed realised – following one wise law.

Today, however, Polish cities are mostly built by developers; communes, and their councils, have practically given up laying out public spaces, and streets are treated as channels for cars. After 1989, no single public park was laid out in Cracow! Public greenery, planted earlier, literally vegetates without much thought or care. What is truly paradoxical, urban verdure seems to be protected by law only by means of draconian bans on felling trees in private gardens [21]. This obviously results in the nearly complete abandonment of traditional varieties of trees, just in case an owner has to undergo the painstaking procedure for the approval of their removal. Moreover, the abandonment regards also traditionally planted blooming fruit trees, blooming shrubs, ivies, and flowers. (Fig. 7) They are all virtually pushed out now by the suddenly,



Fig. 7. A typical new development in Cracow and its garden.  
Photo by G. Urbańska

and amazingly, popular coniferous trees and shrubs, such as cypresses or thujas (*Thuya occidentalis*). Requiring no particular care, growing quite fast, ever green, and looking grave, they were traditionally grown only in cemeteries. Now they truly dominate both the landscape and townscape of Poland.

### 9. Brief summary

In light of all the aforementioned deplorable developments and the epic losses of historic territory, educated classes of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage resulted in the current legal chaos which is exacerbated by

<sup>9</sup> The author is very grateful to Mrs Bożena Nieroda, fellow architect of the Chamber of Architects of the Republic of Poland and urban planner, for pointing out this aspect of the pre-war planning legislation.

<sup>10</sup> Dr E. Sadowska wrote a beautiful biographic account of Professor Drexler, cf.

rapid systemic transformations and adjustment to EU laws (while abandoning their own sound traditions of law) – can one speak of a true funeral of Polish urban (and rural) planning tradition? Indeed, of the irrevocable end of the traditional image of Polish cities and villages? Such dramatic

questions are posed more and more often. One may only hope that the future is not as bright as the chaotically planted, extremely *overpainted* houses, moderated only by rows of stern, sepulchral thujas – *de rigueur*...

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