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CHANCES OF IMPROVING URBAN SPACES APPEAL ON SELECTED EXAMPLES

SZANSE WZROSTU ATRAKCYJNOŚCI PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKIEJ NA WYBRANYCH PRZYKŁADACH

Abstract

The dynamics of changes in urban spaces vary due to diverse local conditions and growth potential of individual urban settlements. The actions undertaken in order to improve the appeal of towns concern first of all improving the quality of public spaces, but they may also be of a broader range and aim at general growth based on the local natural environment conditions.

Interesting examples of urban space transformations are presented by urban settlements with a well-defined leading function meaning unclear. Among such towns are those whose development was based on natural spa and curative characteristics stemming from the existing natural resources and specific climate conditions. The aforementioned resources – documented and used for a long time – need services of continuously improving quality, given the changing market situation and which is connected, this doesn't work here but I'm not sure it's needed anyway the accompanying high quality space.

Keywords: spatial and functional structure, town, spa resort, space

Streszczenie

Dynamika przemian w przestrzeni miejskiej jest zróżnicowana ze względu na lokalne uwarunkowania i możliwości rozwojowe poszczególnych ośrodków. Podejmowane działania wzrostu atrakcyjności miast dotyczą przede wszystkim poprawy jakości przestrzeni publicznych, ale także mogą mieć szerszy zasięg, którego celem jest rozwój w oparciu o lokalne uwarunkowania środowiska naturalnego. Interesującym przykładem przemian przestrzeni są ośrodki o zdefiniowanej wiodącej funkcji. Do takich miast możemy zaliczyć te, których rozwój nastąpił w oparciu o naturalne czynniki uzdrowiskowo lecznicze w związku z występującymi zasobami naturalnymi i specyficznymi warunkami klimatycznymi. Te od dawna wykorzystywane i udokumentowane zasoby przy zmieniających się uwarunkowaniach rynkowych wymagają stałego podnoszenia jakości świadczonych usług i, co z tym związane, poprawy przestrzeni im towarzyszącej.

Słowa kluczowe: struktura funkcjonalno przestrzenna, miasto, uzdrowisko, przestrzeń publiczna

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1. Introduction

During the last ten years, we have been observing a considerable increase in the interest in urban space quality in Poland, especially after Poland's accession to the structures of the European Union. This has meant Poland getting access to pro-growth programmes and the accompanying financial resources, towns have seen their chance to complement and modernise their technical infrastructure as well as to change their image. It has an important influence on the broadly understood quality of life in a given town and also on the improvement of its role and significance in the region.

Urban settlements, in many cases after years of investment stagnation, are now striving to seize the chance to implement the existing plans of development, especially in the public sphere. A precise and well prepared strategy of development, staged over time and focused on the appropriate objectives and priorities, has chances to deliver the expected results.

Therefore, using local conditions is one of the most important factors for creating a new "concept" for a town, its functioning, scale of growth and potential for change. Another factor important for the success of the transformation is the local community, its structure and openness to new ideas, suggestions and values, and also the level of acceptance for the changes in the town space and structure expressed by various groups of residents. Their involvement in improving the environment, also around their own properties, considerably affects and complements the actions undertaken in public spaces. The changes of urban structures take place in settlements of various sizes, they are also characterised by various dynamics. It depends on the town's financial capabilities, accessibility of external sources of funding, including the EU programmes, and the effectiveness in their securing, but also on the determination of the town authorities and their subordinate institutions. An important factor is perseverance in the realisation of planned investment projects and continuity of the initiated transformation process in spite of the periodic change of town authorities. An essential element for getting positive results is the appropriate and detailed preparation of individual project tasks and working out the schedule of project implementation, including staging the works and defining the sources of funding for each budget year of a town or commune.

The whole of the undertaken tasks and their gradual implementation may, with time, build a new quality image of a town. Nevertheless, only the most spectacular ideas put to practice in public spaces give a chance to boost the appeal of a broadly understood urban space. First of all I have in mind here those activities which are undertaken in the most exposed urban spaces and the zones which may in the future become strategically important areas of growth for the town. It is therefore very important to see a town as a whole and to select the areas that are most likely to bring about its transformation. No less important is an analysis of the local conditions and a rational assessment of their growth potential.

Interesting examples of urban space transformations are urban settlements with a well-defined leading function. Among such towns are those whose development was based on natural spa and curative characteristics stemming from the existing natural resources, e.g. mineral water springs, and specific climate conditions¹. The aforementioned resources,

¹ The status of a spa resort or an area of spa protection is granted by the Council of Ministers by way of an ordinance upon a motion issued by a given commune. The ordinance defines the borders and

documented and used for a long time, need services of continuously improving quality, given the changing market situation.

2. Local conditions

As tourism has been seen recently as one of the most important spheres of economic activity in numerous cities and regions in Poland, it would seem relevant to analyse the scale of spatial transformations in selected urban settlements where the development of services for tourists, especially the ones connected with using the potential of the natural spa and curative conditions, plays the leading role in their functioning and growth. Streaming the investment projects in the right directions in such towns seems all the more important from the point of view of their general appeal since on the one hand, it affects improving the urban space quality in the eyes of visitors, but on the other hand, it serves the local community. This provides chances for new employment, and also a more focused spatial development.

Activities undertaken in those towns are subordinate to the superior function, but they also result from a number of formal and legal conditions existing in such areas. Urban settlements with the existing spa function require special treatment and a compromise between protection and modernisation of the spa zones on the one hand, and the need of the town itself and its environs to grow as well on the other.

There are 44 spa resorts in Poland – they are situated in various parts of the country. They are of different sizes, and the spa infrastructure they can offer are on different scales². It would appear that the future use of their potential, regardless of their legal personality or ownership transformations, will increase due to an ageing society, lengthened life expectancy as well as the slow change in perception of this leisure form not only as medical treatment but also as a form of short-term vital forces regeneration³.

Integrating various leisure forms and attractions and offering them together with the spa function may become an interesting option of developing the leading spa function in the future. It would allow spa towns to complement their existing services and develop their tourist infrastructure.

The dynamics of space transformations varies due to diverse local conditions and the growth potential of individual urban settlements. The actions undertaken in order to improve the appeal of urban spaces pertain first of all to improving the quality of public spaces, but they may also be of a more extensive character and aim to develop tourist infrastructure on the basis of the local natural environment conditions. The above refers *inter alia* to towns located in mountainous areas.

Krynica-Zdrój, situated in the Beskid Sądecki, is an interesting urban settlement with a long-lasting tradition of spa medical treatment. It is called ‘the pearl’ of the Polish spa

the curative recommendations of a given area. Detailed information may be found in J. of L. of 2005, No. 167, item 1399, art. 2. The status of a spa resort may be granted to places or areas which have documented deposits of curative resources.

² The data come from the Chamber of Commerce Polish Spa Resorts.

³ The prognosis of demographic change was presented by S. Golinowska in: *Wyzwania Małopolski w kontekście starzenia się społeczeństwa. Podejście strategiczne* [1].

resorts owing to the long tradition of using its natural potential. The spa resort is situated in the central part of the town – its beginnings go back to the 18th and 19th centuries and are connected with the discovery of mineral waters and their subsequent use for medical treatment.

Due to its location in the mountain ranges of the Beskid Sądecki in the valley of the Krynica stream together with its mountain tributaries, since the nineties, the town has been developing its skiing infrastructure on the slopes of Słotwiny and the Jaworzyna Krynicka range. It has given the town an impulse to grow dynamically in connection with the modernization of the tourist infrastructure, focusing on providing services to skiers as a complementary function for the leading spa function. Those actions, far-reaching and promising from the point of view of securing steady growth for the town and using its natural environment conditions for generating profit, contributed with time to an exacerbation of functional and spatial problems in the town. On the one hand, Krynica was striving to create comfortable and cosy conditions for medical treatment visitors, and on the other, it had to provide a slightly different, more dynamic characteristics for winter sports tourists, and it also had to develop the accompanying functions. We should also mention the plans to return to the town's pre-war sports traditions and build a new luge track on Parkowa Mountain and to modernise the hockey infrastructure.

Two other places: Busko-Zdrój and Solec-Zdrój are characterised by slightly different conditions, although their development is also connected with the use of the existing spa infrastructure. Their expansion took place in the 19th century and was the consequence of the discovery of natural sulphide springs in Busko and brine and sulphide springs in Solec, only 18 kilometers away⁴.

These spa resorts, well known in Poland, are situated away from major traffic routes, in the lowland areas of the so-called *Ponidzie* – valuable from the point of view of landscape and natural assets⁵. The distant location from large cities and the agricultural character of the environment additionally promotes relaxation, therapy and recreation with the use of natural resources of unique value. However, there is a threat that the spa function may become excessively dominant thus jeopardizing other aspects of the town growth. The reputation these places enjoy and their attractive locations together create a unique climate, which makes it still possible for them to use their potential for further development in spite of the decrease in the number of inhabitants and limited demographic growth⁶.

However, the undertaken actions should not be aimed solely at improving the quality of the offered services in the spa resort, but they should first of all strive to boost the appeal of the urban space of the whole town, thus giving it a chance to create unique places for relaxing, living and working.

⁴ Busko has 17,024 inhabitants, Krynica 11,085. Solec is an exceptionally small settlement with only approx. 1000 inhabitants, and it has the status of a spa village.

⁵ Busko is situated approx. 80 kilometres to the east of Kraków and approx. 50 kilometres to the south of Kielce.

⁶ The data come from demographic and economic prognoses presented in Local Strategies for Development [8].

3. Functional and spatial structure

The functional and spatial structures of the selected urban settlements vary in respect to character and quality. One common feature is similar development in the spa zone and its representational character and style. After many years, it still remains a relic of past splendour and testifies to the significance that was attached to spa facilities and infrastructure design from the very beginning of their existence. Even in the present day, it is a symbol speaking of the old traditions of these places, their exceptional style and unique climate.

In the case of Krynica, the spa resort occupies the central part of the town constituting the most attractive public space. Its spatial form results from the natural conditions and land configuration, these factors allowed the whole spatial arrangement to retain its cosy and intimate scale. The main compositional element is the pedestrian promenade lined with old sanatorium and guest-house buildings as well as spa facilities, which until this day bears traces of former splendour and history of this place (Ill. 1). A unique feature of this spa resort is using Parkowa Mountain for the purpose of recreation – with numerous pedestrian routes providing alternative links between the southern and eastern parts of the town.



Ill. 1. Krynica – the representational promenade in the centre of the spa resort lined with sanatorium and services developments (photo by the author, 2012)

In the period of its post-war growth, especially in the 60s and 70s, Krynica extended its tourist and sanatorium infrastructure, mostly located in the surroundings of the historic centre and also along the main streets, which were also outbound roads in the direction of Nowy Sącz, Tylicz and Muszyna. The development took different architectural forms, complementing the existing dense urban fabric, often of guest-house character. These structures in their majority

were not adjusted in their scale or style to the existing development, and since they were erected on plots of limited size and with a large difference in altitudes, they created a medley of development, often of aggressive, domineering architectural forms.

Multi-family development complexes also appeared in the 70s and 80s at the foot of Parkowa Mountain, at the inbound road from Nowy Sącz, and in Czarny Potok (*Black Stream*) – all of them in very exposed locations and built without any care for architectural detail or any attempt at harmonising them with the context of the town (Ill. 2). The 90s brought in-fills into the development, new hotel facilities and modernisation of the existing ones, often connected with the change of owners resulting from the social and economic transformations and with the creation of a new ski centre in the area of Jaworzyna Krynicka and Czarny Potok, which until then had been a distant and rather peripheral area of the town (Ill. 6).



Ill. 2. Krynica, multi-family development in Czarny Potok. The layout and architectural form do not comply with the local conditions (photo by the author, 2012)

In Busko and Solec, the spa zones are situated in the southern parts of the towns. Due to the small spatial scale, they constitute integral parts compositionally bound with the remaining urban fabric. These distinctive bonds seem to be part of a very clear layout of the whole urban settlement, which in both cases gives a chance for their proper display.

In Busko, the town grew to the north of the spa resort. The centre is made up of a market square with dense residential and service developments. The prevailing development is residential, partly guest house type. In the vicinity of the centre, there are also small complexes of multi-family developments, which complement the dominating



III. 3. Krynica, modern multi-family development along Piłsudskiego Street and the Kryniczanka stream, adversely dominant in the space of the town (photo by the author, 2012)

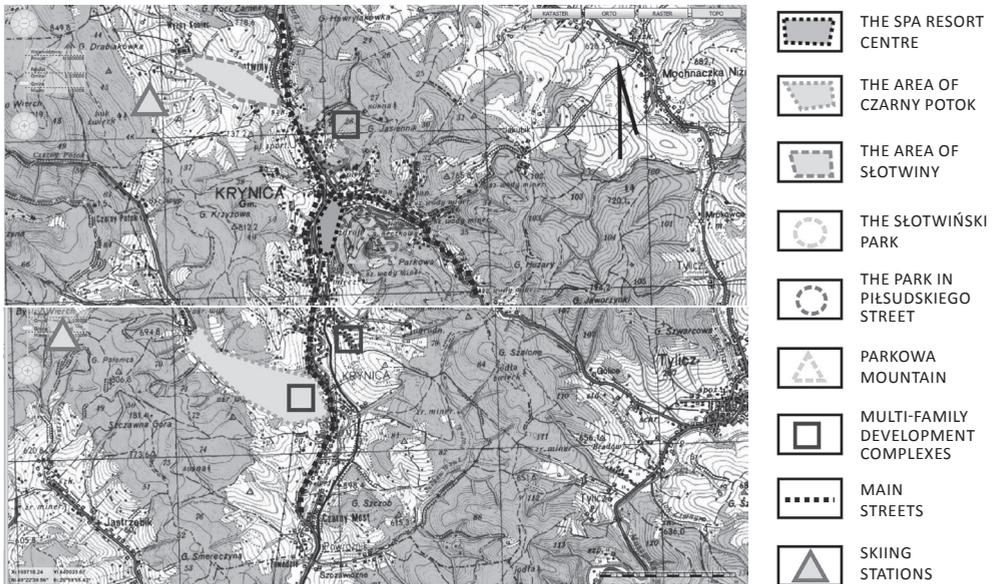


III. 4. Busko-Zdrój, the spa resort park extension. A new form of arranging the green area in the vicinity of the spa resort (photo by the author, 2012)

single-family type of urban structure. In the outskirts of the town, there remains some farmhouse development, which reflects the still preserved agricultural character of the town surroundings.

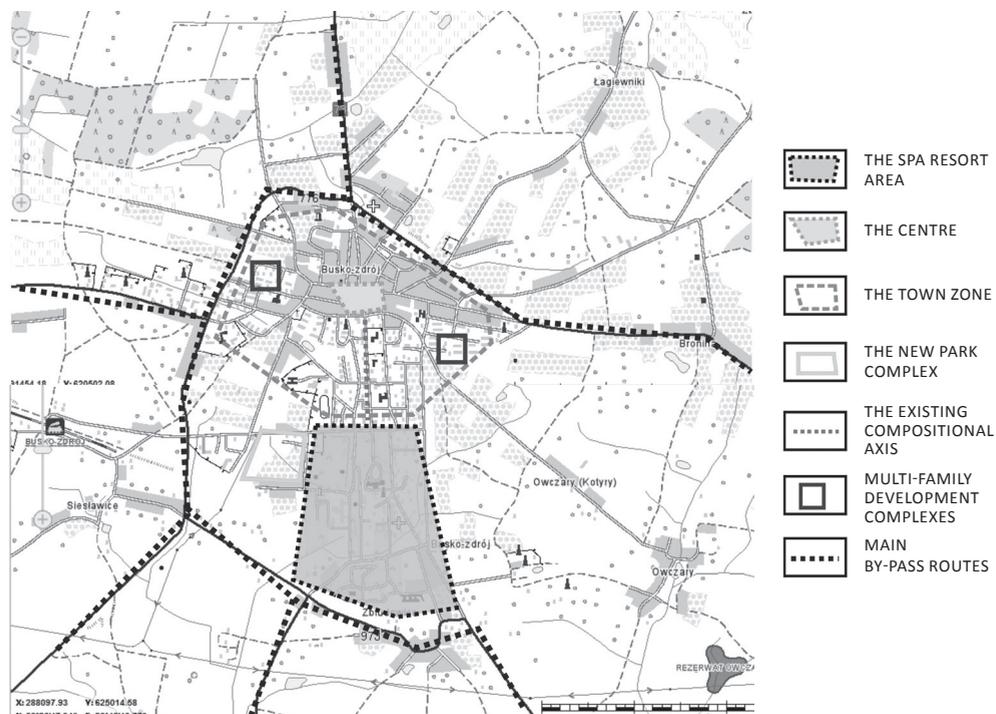


III. 5. Solec-Zdrój, the historic building of the baths in the spa resort park
(photo by the author, 2012)



III. 6. Krynica – diagram of the selected elements of the functional and spatial structure
(produced by the author, 2012)

Apart from the characteristic spa resort area, Busko has not developed an equally strong spatial accent, for example in the form of a new centre, within the existing market square urban layout (III. 7).



III. 7. Busko-Zdrój – the spa zone against the background of the selected elements of the functional and spatial structure (done by the author, 2012)

Solec Zdrój is an even smaller urban settlement. Here, the 19th century park complex together with the guest-house facilities along Danielewskich Street is an example of the former clear idea of designing a small urban settlement in an open landscape.

Despite the small scale of the settlement and the free-standing spa facilities as well as the accompanying single-family and farmhouse development from the north and east, the prevailing impression is one of a small town rather than a village. The main reason seems to be the character and form of the historic-value spa facilities, a lot smaller than the ones in Busko, yet aptly designed in their scale and well suited to the open landscape (III. 8).

Analysis of the existing functional and spatial structure of the selected settlements indicates a need to adjust the plans to adjust the plans to the existing spatial relations in order to improve the attractiveness of the urban space. It also points out the specific conditions and climate of a given town, which should be protected in the process of making new spatial decisions so that the unique values of the natural and cultural environment would be preserved. It is also important to keep the right proportions of changes, which should first of all complement the existing settlement and constitute a kind of modern continuation of the old principles.



III. 8. Solec-Zdrój – selected elements of the functional and spatial structure set against the background of the existing transportation network (done by the author, 2012)

4. Transportation services

Due to the need to protect their spa resorts, towns tend to limit the transportation accessibility of the central spa areas. Nevertheless, the location of the sanatorium facilities involves the necessity to provide access for visitors and personnel. Banning car parks from the spa zone under strict protection is a cause of great inconvenience. Since there are no comprehensive actions aimed at solving transportation problems in the scale of the whole town, the bans alone appear ineffective and they only aggravate conflicts, especially when they are combined with uncomfortable or limited public transportation services.

Krynica seems to be most affected by transportation difficulties. The town has not been able to provide convenient transportation service for years, and the number of cars has been growing incessantly. The main problems include lack of parking spaces both in the town and at individual holiday facilities as well as the ever growing transit traffic through the town centre in the direction of Muszyna – this is aggravated by seasonal intensive traffic generated by visitors to the Czarny Potok and Słotwiny skiing stations. Due to the specific character of long-term parking in the town, dense development and limited land availability, there are no systematic solutions that would provide the option of leaving cars in some indicated strategic places. Expansion of the additional sports function in the town without any attempt to solve the problem of transportation accessibility, may with time lead to total gridlock of the town and a deterioration of the living and holiday-making standards. Failure to use the railway as an alternative means of transport for visitors coming into the town seems to be yet another issue. However, it would require some investment and an improvement of the service quality.

Busko and Solec are less affected by vehicle traffic as it is much less intensive there. It results first of all from the location of both settlements and also from the absence of any additional functions that would generate traffic. Busko, being the seat of the local

commune administration, plays the role of a services centre for the nearest environs, which involves traffic of mostly local character. The highest volume of transit traffic occurs in the north-east part and is connected with the Tarnów – Kielce regional road which passes through. There are limitations imposed upon vehicle traffic in the spa resort, it is reduced only to servicing individual spa facilities with a limited number and organisation of parking spaces.

The transportation system in Solec is in turn a very organic system resulting from the gradual growth of the spa resort village. A characteristic feature is the preserved almost axial route of the main street gradually blending into the park complex of the spa resort. We can hardly talk about fundamental transportation problems in a town of such a small scale, yet undoubtedly introducing a certain order into the structure and the modernisation of pedestrian passages may boost the appeal of the area.

5. New forms of area development

All the analysed spa resort towns are characterised by a large potential for growth. Yet, implementation of pro-growth plans appears ineffective at present and is limited to modernisation of technical infrastructure, including transportation infrastructure, and a few actions aimed at the renovation of some individual facilities. All larger-scale projects are still at the planning stage, for example in Krynica, there are plans to modernise the main promenade as the most representational part of the spa resort and to launch some projects in the area of the buffer zone around the historic part of the town – Parkowa Mountain, the Municipal Park (*Park Miejski*), Piłsudskiego Street joining this part of the town with the centre as well as plans to do some works in the area of the Słotwiński Park.

It is difficult, however, with the present state of the area development, to find a discernible relation between the two complexes of municipal arranged green areas. It would be interesting to use the existing paths along the Kryniczanka stream for pedestrian traffic and recreational purposes, but the compact and dense development in this area has rendered it virtually impossible (Ill. 3). Unfortunately, the planned construction of a gondola lift station at the inbound road from the Nowy Sącz direction was aborted and so were plans to locate car parks in this area, which considerably limited the possibilities to arrange the town's transportation network in some orderly manner. The construction of a ring-road providing some relief for the centre in the direct vicinity of the spa resort does not hold much promise for realisation, either. Therefore, any chances of boosting the town's appeal are limited solely to some projects modernising the existing infrastructure in a rather conservative way.

Relatively large transformations of space are taking place in the areas located in Czarny Potok – the peripheral zone situated in the southern part of the town. A multi-family development complex is now under construction there as well as numerous hotel facilities which are to predominantly serve the tourist and skiing traffic. It is a natural consequence of building a skiing station on the slopes of Jaworzyna Krynicka and the plan to construct new infrastructure to serve its needs. From the point of view of the town's urban growth, it seems important to define the way this zone is to be linked to the rest of the town in the future, not only in the aspect of transportation but also in the spatial sense.

For many years, Busko has been untouched by any spatial transformations. The spa resort infrastructure has been subject to a limited process of modernisation and development relying first of all on the existing facilities. It was only in recent years, and thanks to the possibility of using external sources of funding, that new investment projects have taken place. The idea of rebuilding the town's main street joining the market square with the spa resort park and giving it a new representational character is interesting from the spatial point of view.

This historic settlement has been waiting for years for a new aesthetic setting. It seems that implementation of this investment project together with modernisation and activation of the market square space will contribute to the image change of the whole town – joining its two parts into one uniform organism. An interesting starting point for these actions is the already completed new part of the spa resort park, giving the town's green areas an attractive modern form and also contributing to the protection of the historic spa zone (Ill. 4). This landscape character of the town's development may become in the future one of the most apt concepts for the town's growth and using its attractive natural conditions.

Spatial transformations in Solec are of a very limited character, which results from a small scale of the whole settlement's urban structure. The main activities focus on the modernisation and partial reconstruction of the preserved historic value guest houses of the spa resort. The spa resort park with the historic baths facility situated on a recreational water reservoir and surrounded by wooded areas are still waiting for their former splendour to be restored to them (Ill. 5). At present, a complex of mineral water bathing pools is being built in this area, which to a certain degree, connects to the tradition of spa baths.

An interesting feature of this area is the system of watercourses directly linked to the park complex. Solec requires the undertaking of comprehensive actions modernising the existing urban fabric, but it needs an especially sensitive approach in order to preserve the intimate and cosy character of the whole settlement, which seems unique, especially now when numerous urban settlements are seeking new functions which would activate the space to varying degrees. Preserving the present exceptional climate of the place is the most reasonable direction in which the town should aim to develop.

6. Conclusions

The presented examples of urban settlements with a leading spa function indicate a considerable potential of natural conditions successfully used for many years for curative and rehabilitation purposes. Nevertheless, founding and developing towns which have rich resources of natural curative agents requires a specific approach, on the one hand, oriented towards growth and protection of the spa resort, but on the other, towards ensuring that the remaining parts of the town may also grow in a sustainable way. The presented examples of settlements vary in terms of their location and spatial structure scale, but they are similar in the aspect of the natural resources in their possession, and they manifest big potential for growth, of course suited to their respective sizes and local conditions. In each case, the essential element that undergoes transformation is the spa resort, constituting the most attractive part, yet subject to limitations resulting from the extensive

legal protection system. It frequently imposes limitations, but looking from the point of view of the primary goal, it seems reasonable as it may prevent excessive intervention into these valuable areas.

Spa resorts, with their well-developed curative and recreational infrastructure, are the most attractive town areas, and they influence the whole urban settlements because they are their integral parts. Nevertheless, for functional and compositional reasons, they should be linked to the other parts of the town in a natural way. It would give a chance for boosting the appeal of urban spaces leading to integrating them into a uniform urban organism. The first attempt at such a transformation may be seen in Busko, where the planned compositionally clear modernisation of Mickiewicz Street joining the spa resort with the town's market square gives a chance for spatial integration of the town in the future⁷.

A similar solution, although on a smaller scale, has a chance of realisation in the future in the area of Solec Zdrój. It will use the historic park complex with former guest-house and treatment facilities located within its boundaries. Krynica, on the other hand, due to the high level of urbanisation of the areas neighbouring the spa resort and its central location within the town boundaries, seems to strive to integrate the spa resort with the rest of the town by introducing some order into the arrangement of its green areas constituting the spa resort buffer zone and linking the old spa resort historic facilities, including Parkowa Mountain. Nevertheless, developing the tourist functions requires far more extensive strategic actions. In the case of Krynica, they should include tidying up the issue of transportation accessibility, which involves solving the problem of the transit traffic passing through the town, implementing comprehensive parking solutions combined with developing modern municipal public transport and providing access to the skiing stations in Słotwiny and Czarny Potok.

Urban settlements with a spa function have had considerable chances of boosting their urban space appeal, especially in the last few years. The undertaken action should first of all:

- take into account the town's local specific character and conditions;
- strive to tie the spa resorts with the remaining urban structure in a natural way;
- seek an optimum architectural and urban form for new investment undertakings in order to integrate them harmoniously into the existing fabric;
- solve the growing transportation problems connected with the increasing traffic volume in a way that would also offer a possibility to improve access to selected zones of the town and spa resort;
- improve the quality of the spa resort infrastructure expanding where possible the range of provided services, which may give the settlements in question a competitive edge over their contenders;
- it is also important to improve the aesthetics and quality of public spaces since they affect the general image of the town and its appeal;
- it is important to preserve the right proportions in the changes, which should first of all complement and continue in a natural, although modern, way the old functional and spatial principles.

⁷ The design of this joining element is a result of an urban design contest organised in 2011 by Busko-Zdrój Town and Commune Administration.

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