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## CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONS OF WATERCOURSES IN SZCZYRK – THE SILESIA BESKIDS

### WSPÓŁCZESNE OTOCZENIE CIEKÓW WODNYCH W SZCZYRKU – BESKID ŚLĄSKI

#### Abstract

As a town of abundant natural environment resources, Szczyrk provides a good example of the spatial transformations taking place in recent years. The changes also affect watercourses and areas indicated as eligible for the status of protected areas. Nevertheless, the changes now in progress not only fail to comply with the currently valid trends in architecture and urban planning, but also frequently copy erroneous solutions from the past. The existing situation calls for undertaking appropriate actions for the future, which will enable preservation of the natural environment in the possibly unchanged form so that it could coexist with humans and their activities.

*Keywords:* Szczyrk, rivers, urbanized area, protected area, natural environment, riverbed, watercourse, public space, the Beskids

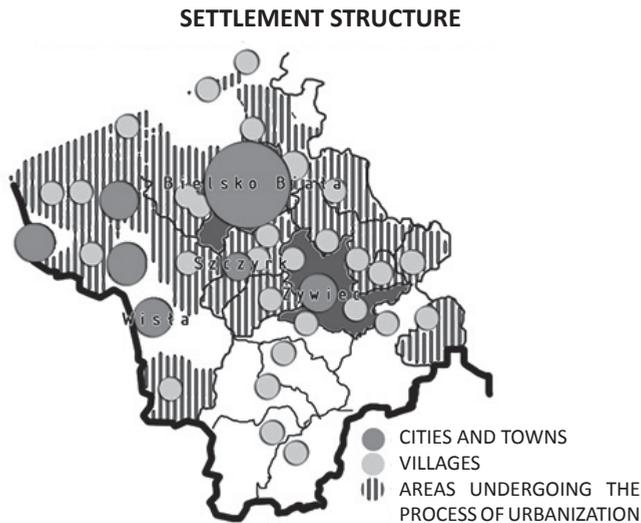
#### Streszczenie

Szczyrk jako miasto o bogatych zasobach środowiska przyrodniczego jest przykładem transformacji przestrzennych dokonujących się w ostatnich latach. Zmianom tym podlegają także cieki wodne oraz obszary postulowane do nadania im statusu obszarów chronionych. Jednak dokonujące się przemiany nie tylko różnią się z obowiązującymi trendami w architekturze i urbanistyce, lecz często powielają błędne rozwiązania z przeszłości. W istniejącej sytuacji zachodzi potrzeba podjęcia odpowiednich kroków na przyszłość. Umożliwi to zachowanie środowiska naturalnego w możliwie niezmienionej formie tak, by mogło ono koegzystować z działalnością człowieka.

*Słowa kluczowe:* Szczyrk, rivers, urbanized area, protected area, natural environment, riverbed, watercourse, public space, the Beskids

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The area of the Beskids, especially recently, has been undergoing the process of considerable transformations. Numerous economic changes are taking place here involving first of all a significant rise in the number of new construction projects – consisting not only in erecting new facilities but also effecting changes in public spaces. The actions aim at activating the thus far neglected areas but they also strive to create a network of new areas of diversified functional programme. There are also numerous undertakings in which the transformations are co-financed primarily by the EU funds.



Ill. 1. Silesian voivodship settlement structure (prepared by the author)

Due to the land topography, most towns in the area of the Beskids are situated in mountain valleys. This feature, combined with other natural conditions, makes such towns popular tourist destinations, and tourism is the driving force for the development of some urban centres. One such town is Szczyrk, which together with Wisła and Ustroń, constitutes a tourist ‘tricity’ of a kind in the Żywiec region. Numerous ski lifts, hiking and cycling trails, as well as many sports facilities of significant national rank make it an exceptionally attractive town for visitors. We should also mention numerous examples of animate and inanimate nature as well as the areas of the ‘Promotional Forest Complex’ and sizeable areas protected by the NATURA 2000 programme<sup>1</sup>. In the area of Wisła and Ustroń there is already a protection zone of ‘Curative, Natural and Climate Assets of Spa Resorts’. Favourable conditions are being created for commercial undertakings whose activities do not adversely affect the environment.

<sup>1</sup> NATURA 2000 – European Ecological Network; the programme was created as a system of protection of endangered species and biological diversity of the European continent; it has been implemented since 1992. The network of areas comprises two area types: a network of special protection areas for birds (SPA) and special areas of habitat conservation (SAC).

Nevertheless, there is yet another factor necessary for all those positive impulses to take effect. The town should, or indeed it must have public spaces which are functional and visually attractive. They should be safe for their users (including disabled people) and, due to the type of development and the location within the surrounding landscape, they should be saturated with greenery penetrating into the town from the surrounding forested mountain slopes.

New projects in public spaces do not always meet all the requirements of sustainable development. A good example is Szczyrk and its ‘Deptak nad Żylicą’ (*Promenade along the Żylica*), a street which stretches through nearly the whole town along the Żylica river<sup>2</sup>. In the past, it used to be a largely dilapidated area, yet in the years 2010–2011, the appearance of this precinct was changed completely. The ruined and uneven paving had been replaced so that the pedestrian and cycling route would promote recreation and transportation. It has considerably facilitated moving around the town and in consequence, the pedestrian and vehicle traffic has risen in volume. At present, a lot of residents use this alternative route around the town in fine weather. However, due to the aforementioned strongly linear layout of the town as well as to the scarce presence of services in the vicinity of the promenade, tourists tend to choose the main road, where most of the services are situated. There is also a system of parallel parking along the main road, which the promenade does not have. Therefore, at present the promenade remains a second-choice option.



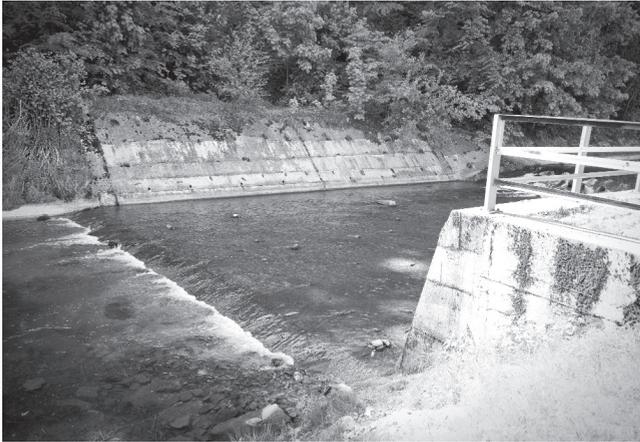
III. 2. The Promenade along the Żylica before transformation (photo by the author, 2009)



III. 3. The Promenade along the Żylica after the reconstruction (photo by the author, 2009)

There are some attempts at encouraging people to use the promenade, e.g. small playgrounds for children have been arranged in its vicinity. Yet, due to the very extensive transformation of the riverbed which was done while the river was being regulated, some of those areas are surrounded by a wall. There are also deep culverts and drainage canals which pose a real danger to children. The heights of those facilities are large enough for a child to suffer a limb fracture in the case of falling, not to mention some more serious injuries. The scale of the problem is large, because the riverbed has been turned into a concrete drainpipe, which has a permeable bottom only in certain sections, and this is only because concrete slabs of a grate structure have been used there. It has to be mentioned that in certain places,

<sup>2</sup> The Żylica – a mountain river in the Silesian Beskids and Żywiec Dale, with its spring on the northern slopes of Malinów and Salmopol Pass in the area of Szczyrk – Salmopol.



III. 4. The Žylica river and its high walled embankment (photo by the author, 2012)



III. 5. Unprotected infrastructure elements next to a playground (photo by the author, 2012)



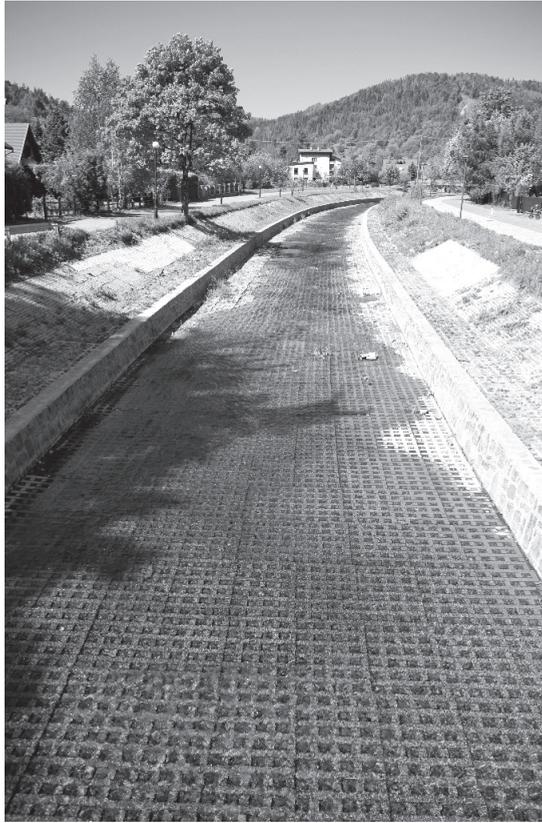
III. 6. The Žylica river banks lined with concrete – to the right: discernible a part of a playground (photo by the author, 2012)

the banks have been lined with concrete for more than a metre over the water surface with a very slight sloping angle. The above observation must lead to the conclusion that the land has been covered with hard surfacing without any reason – such actions do not increase the efficiency of the town’s protection against flooding. A shallow basin with smooth surfaces, which impedes percolation of excess water during heavy rainfalls, only makes the situation worse by increasing the velocity of water flow. Thus, instead of protecting the town from flooding, it produces the exact opposite effect. In fact, nature has already verified the level of durability of several implemented solutions – in many places, the bottom has been damaged. The soil under the concrete slabs has been washed away, which has caused their collapse. The visual impression has greatly deteriorated due to this occurrence – it confirms that the maxim ‘more is better’ is not always the case. If the riverbed had been left in its natural state, such a situation would never have taken place, as it would have been shaped in the same manner all along its course. Moreover, even if there had been some points of damage, they would not have been so strikingly visible against the natural background, as is the case with artificial reinforcement.



Ill. 7. Damages to the artificial riverbed bottom (photo by the author, 2012)

Another consequence is the general deterioration of the visual and natural values of this area. Due to such distinct differences between the materials used in the watercourse environs and the surroundings, the natural borderline between the area of natural values (including water) and the users of this area becomes more distant. Such a method of developing the riverbanks also adversely affects the growth of natural vegetation accompanying watercourses. A large number of plant species grow in such places and they create the specific character of near-water areas. An attempt to transfer natural processes into a riverbed that has been turned into a concrete drainpipe is, from the start, doomed to failure. The riverbank running through the whole town is a wall, sloping more in certain places and less in others – in extreme cases, it is an almost a vertical wall as high as an adult person.



III. 8. The imposed industrial form (photo by the author, 2012)



III. 9. One of the storm water drainage outlets (photo by the author, 2012)

The only effect that may have justified the undertaken actions is the psychological effect – regulating the banks of the small river flowing in the direct vicinity of buildings is supposed to give the illusionary sense of security. It is illusionary because in the Local Land Use Plan for the town of Szczyrk (hereinafter referred to as LLUP) the area marked as the zone immediately threatened by flood encompasses a larger area than the riverbed and is actually the same as the area of development, which confirms the unreasonable character of the implemented solutions. Even the impression of the area’s orderly arrangement is illusionary. A closer scrutiny reveals numerous problems that still have not been properly addressed, such as numerous storm water drainage outlets, which spoil the aesthetic impression.

From the legal point of view, the situation is ambiguous too. On the one hand, LLUP calls for new zones of natural environment protection, but on the other, it indicates the need to construct protection supports against flooding. Another problem is the inconsistency between what has been written in the plan and what may be seen in reality. For example: LLUP emphasizes the necessity “to preserve biological diversity and environmental balance as well as natural character”<sup>3</sup> of the indicated ecological sites (and some areas along the Żylica as well as the area UE10-Szczyrk are such ecological sites).

Zones of immediate protection for springs and water intake points have been marked out, with reference to which, an obligation has been imposed to fence the areas within the zone<sup>4</sup>. If we take a more general look at the whole problem, it will seem obvious that it is impossible to preserve the natural character of an area and at the same time build fences around everything that is valuable. Regulations referring to the protection of surface waters seem equally peculiar, as the solutions which they recommend are completely different from the ones we can see while strolling down the promenade. For example, LLUP writes about “providing access to water in compliance with the principle of universal use of waters” and about “the protection of biological buffer zones around surface waters”<sup>5</sup>.

It would appear that the town authorities have attempted to link some public areas important for the town with the route of the promenade – after all, it runs not only through the square in front of the Town Hall but also through the area where the bus station was formerly located. It was rebuilt, however, in the years 2010/2011 and considerably reduced in size in the process, and the rest of the area was supposed to be turned into a public space focusing the so-called town life. The location is quite valuable in the sense that it is in the very heart of the town. It is also directly adjacent to the river. Nevertheless, the changes that have been introduced here resemble the ones done to the promenade, i.e. it has been paved with completely new surfacing. The pavement (block paviers in the 4 main shades) creates a cared-for and neat impression. It is not clear, however, why the pavement had to tightly cover the greater part of the parcel. Now the place resembles a concrete square, which it is not, and for several reasons:

- an area is not an urban square unless there are buildings situated at its sides, which constitute its boundaries;
- a lot of benches, rubbish bins, bicycle stands and lanterns have been placed there, but all these things are situated in the middle of the square along the central axis, which excludes certain functionalities that should be available for a space aspiring to the name of ‘urban square’. Certainly, this deficiency might be explained by the fact that the town develops

<sup>3</sup> Local Land Use Plan for the Town of Szczyrk – art. 92, para. 8, point 3.

<sup>4</sup> Local Land Use Plan for the Town of Szczyrk – art. 94, para. 1, point 1.

<sup>5</sup> Local Land Use Plan for the Town of Szczyrk – art. 92, para. 9, point 2a and point 2c.

the area of the Skalite stage elsewhere, yet the question still remains – what is the point of creating such a huge paved area if it cannot be used for any mass event due to the presence of a large amount of street furniture that cannot be dismantled?

- the new space does not correlate in any way with its environs, so much so that the new ‘square’ is adjacent to the backyard of a hotel. At one end, the main axis leads the eye towards the Elbrus hotel, which is not even directly at the end of the axis but only in the background, and the other end is defined by a forest. In a sense, such a way of closing a panorama is typical of public areas in mountainous towns, yet in this case, it additionally emphasizes the impression of absence of any spatial elements that would define the area of the square.

The only bit of greenery that has been spared is a meagre group of lanky trees in the middle of the area. In the visual context, it looks but mediocre. Its impact on the spectator is significantly smaller than the one created by the greenery surrounding the town, also perfectly visible from here.

Writing about the situation at the junction between water and public spaces, it is impossible not to mention the new fountain which has been placed here. The idea matches the concept of the remaining part of the design. It is a drainpipe made of concrete and paving blocks, running along approximately one third of the parcel’s length. Once again, the possibly least natural form has been chosen.

One might get the impression that there is a certain aspiration to draw from the abundant resources of the natural environment, yet the manner in which it is being done is completely counter-effective. There is no question of bringing humans closer to nature by lining it with concrete, paving it up, erecting walls or such invasive riverbed regulations. Arranging public spaces in this way and equipping them with such technical infrastructure defies the principles of sustainable development or indeed of natural and urban environments’ coexistence.

Looking at the Żylica river from the point of view of an architect, it has to be concluded that it has been given a too technical character, making the river, which is by definition a landscape’s natural element, into something that would be more accurately described by the name ‘storm water canal’. The only material that brings it closer to the natural element is water. Natural beauty has been covered with concrete lining – the original character of the river has been transformed in a way that should have never occurred in this place. A town like Szczyrk may be considered a model example of an ideal location for a tourist destination. Situated in a richly forested mountain valley, abounding in mountain springs and having a river – it should encourage visitors to use the plentiful resources of the natural environment, not only with its function, but with its form as well. Otherwise, not only does it not make the proper use of the potential it has at its disposal, but frequently destroys the features that define the town’s character.

It should be realized that Szczyrk is not the sole town in which the transformations of watercourses and their adjoining public areas similar to the ones discussed above occur; it has just been presented as an example. Creating new barriers brings about new spatial and environment conflicts, which will only be added to the list of the already existing ones and aggravate some of them. Understanding the need to protect the environment is a more profound concept than enclosing everything with walls – it is first of all, a certain social awareness consisting of perceiving and respecting common values. What we lack is a certain common vision of protecting the natural environment and its value while enjoying its beauty

and resources at the same time. Instead of undertaking actions that have been described in this paper, we should strive to preserve the possibly most natural form of the environment – not only because of the need to comply with the principles of sustainable development, but also for the sake of ourselves.

## References

- [1] Silesian Voivodeship Land Use Plan of 2004.
- [2] Water Law – an act passed on the 18<sup>th</sup> July 2001.
- [3] Directive 2000/60/EC of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Oct. 2000, the so-called Water Framework Directive.
- [4] Local Land Use Plan for the Town of Szczyrk – together with its visual attachment No. 1 to the Szczyrk Town Council Resolution No. XXXIX/226/2006 of the 5<sup>th</sup> January 2006.
- [5] Extract from the Study of Land Use Conditions and Directions for the Town of Szczyrk – appendix “C” – “Principles and directions of spatial policy design / structure of settlement, transportation, functional and spatial layout, recreation, sport / set against the background of the land structure”.
- [6] Nature Conservation Act of the 16<sup>th</sup> April 2004 (J. of L. of 2004, No. 92).
- [7] Sozological maps of the areas at present located within the boundaries of the Silesian Voivodeship – prepared by “GEPOL”, Poznań 1995, approved by the Chief National Land Surveyor, Warszawa 1995.