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**ISSUES WITH THE
COUNTRYSIDE. CONTEMPORARY
ARCHITECTURE IN SEARCH OF
IDENTITY OF RURAL LANDSCAPE**

The *Trouble in Paradise* project developed as an exhibit to be showcased at the Polish Pavilion during the 17th Biennale Architettura in Venice was a response to the headline of the 2021 edition of the event – *How Will We Live Together?* This response took the form of a historical, sociological and geographical reflection on the Polish countryside, undertaken by the PROLOG +1 group and the design studios from Poland and abroad invited to take part in the project. Due to the pandemic, the exhibition was postponed until 2021. That year also saw the publication of the book *Kłopoty ze sztuką ludową* [The Folk Art Issue] by Ewa Klekot, an anthropological account of the changes in the perception, conceptualisation and exploiting of folklore and folk art in Polish culture over the past 150 years. One can therefore conclude that even though the Polish countryside is the main subject of an ever-growing body of works presenting diverging perspectives and sparking numerous discussions and debates, giving rise to new artworks, exhibitions, films and representations in popular culture, it still remains largely troublesome, and with the growing modernisation of Poland, it becomes increasingly difficult to grasp its specificity and – perhaps most importantly – to determine the directions of its development, or its or confirm its disappearance, as some would certainly prefer.

This interest is largely driven by the attempts to define our collective identity, which was and is still being shaped in terms of a negation of the rural, reflected in the wealth of derogatory terms conflating rural origin and other practices, which are sometimes referred to as an expression of *chamofobia*, which could be translated as ‘booraphobia’.¹ According to Jan Sowa and Andrzej Leder, who speak from the point of view of psychoanalysis, our ‘rural’ identity is an indelible source of collective trauma, although, understandably, this vision of the aporetic situation of Polishness sparks controversy.² On the other hand, in studies dealing with the construct of ‘folklore’ as a source of national identity, the dominant perspective indicates the appropriation of folk culture by the official culture of the state, occurring (especially in the period of the Polish People’s Republic, although it was apparent even at earlier stages) simultaneously with a pushback against folk customs and rural ‘backwardness’ as well as the push for techno-

1 Cf. “Chamofobia”: debata Kontakt, *Magazyn Kontakt*, 23 September 2013, <<https://magazynkontakt.pl/chamofobia-debata-kontakt/>> [accessed: 18.04.2022].

2 Cf. J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Kraków, 2011; A. Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja: ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*, Warsaw, 2014 and the commentary to Leder’s book by Aleksandra Bilewicz, where the author points out Leder’s one-sided assessment of the history of Polish countryside as the history of failed modernisation, as well as the characterisation of its space as ‘post-traumatic’, without taking into account any alternative development paths. A. Bilewicz, ‘Przebudźmy się!’, *Nowy Obywatel*, 2014, no. 14 (65), <<https://nowyobywatel.pl/2014/11/14/przebudzmy-sie/>> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

logical, and moral renewal.³ From this point of view, the contemporary popularisation of folk and regional motifs in commercial architecture, visual culture, music and design might be interpreted as a Leder's kind of 'self-folklorisation', to quote Ewa Klekot describing this phenomenon.⁴ The phenomenon of self-folklorisation is an attempt to play out one's own folk culture, undertaking cultural practices recognised by the official national culture as examples of folklore, as well as identification with that culture imposed by institutions, language, tourism, and the market.⁵

In this paper, the author attempts to confront the approaches that have arisen in the humanities and social sciences with the reflection present in the field of architecture – not only in theoretical analyses of its specificity and its condition, but also in architectural practice. To that end, it is an attempt at an in-depth look into the field concerned which is concerned not so much with representing but shaping the rural space. Interestingly, this is where we can see the negative assessment of the spatial and aesthetic condition of the Polish countryside, which reiterates the diagnoses stemming from the fields of sociology and anthropology, and on the other hand there are suggestions for more or less practical solutions to the issues plaguing its architecture, as well as comprehensive visions for the transformation of the rural landscape – with some bordering on a utopia. However, it should be pointed out that many of these suggestions, which are preceded by an analysis of the current state of the Polish countryside, are statements of a sociological nature offering an answer to one simple question – how do we live? How could we live? What does not work in rural communities, and why?

WHY IS THE POLISH COUNTRYSIDE UGLY?

In England, a country which is unique in all of Europe in terms of the role of rural space as an identity-forming factor, where the rural south of the country became a synecdoche of cultural 'Englishness' in the 19th century,⁶ the model of rural life was (and still is) reproduced by many urban

3 Cf. E. Klekot, *Kłopoty ze sztuką ludową. Gust, ideologie, nowoczesność*, Gdańsk, 2021; *Polska – kraj folkloru?*, ed. J. Kordjak, Warsaw, 2016; *Pany chłopy chłopy pany*, W. Szymański, M. Ujma (eds.), Nowy Sącz, 2016; P. Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż. Towarzystwo Popierania Przemysłu Ludowego, Cepelia, Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego*, Warsaw, 2013.

4 E. Klekot, 'Samofolklorizacja. Współczesna sztuka ludowa z perspektywy krytyki postkolonialnej', *Kultura Współczesna. Teorie. Interpretacje. Praktyka*, 2014, no. 1, pp. 86–99. In the paper, Klekot refers to Alexander Kiossev's concept of self-colonisation, or the cultural identification of the periphery seeking to modernise with the colonial centre. Cf. A. Kiossev, *The Self-Colonizing Metaphor*, [in:] *Atlas of Transformation*, <<http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html>> [accessed: 09.09.2022].

5 Ibidem, p. 98.

6 Cf. K. Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 175–225.

residents. Contemporary scholars also highlight the less idyllic dimensions of this space, where the beautiful landscape, dotted with quaint villages and picturesque hedgerows, masks centuries of the economic exploitation of the local populace and the colonies, exclusion, racism, policies of displacement of the masses while fencing off estates, etc.⁷ In that case, the 'dark sides of the landscape' are hidden deep beneath an idyllic picture.

In Poland, on the other hand, ugliness seems to be the biggest issue, and the rural landscape is seen as a visual manifestation of everything that is wrong with the country in terms of social relations, class disparity, as well as space management and personal tastes. There are many reasons for this phenomenon. In the Great Britain, by the mid-19th century, the urban population outnumbered the rural communities, triggering sentimental (usually only mental) returns to the countryside and an idealisation of rural life, which was no longer available to a big part of the populace.⁸ Poland, on the other hand, remains a rural and agricultural country, with about 40% of the population living in rural areas, where urban centres are also often rural in nature.⁹ Areas administratively defined as rural occupy 93% of the country's territory, while 60% of this land is devoted to agriculture.¹⁰ In addition, an increasing diversification of the economic activities undertaken there is evident, and the multiplicity of functions of rural areas goes hand in hand with the disappearance of biodiversity.¹¹

Although many peripheral rural areas are depopulating, the countryside gained half a million new residents between 2002 and 2011, indicating a growing counterurbanisation trend.¹² What is even more important, the new inhabitants of the countryside bring with them a model of life different from that typical of the countryside but which is adopted by the existing populace. The result that emerges from these practices is a rural landscape filled with buildings that spark widespread concern, which is often brought up in the trade and popular press due to their layouts and architectural forms. Researchers and scholars lament

7 Cf. W.J. Darby, *Landscape and Identity: Geographies of Nation and Class in England*, Oxford, 2000; C. Dwyer, C. Bressey, *New Geographies of Race and Racism*, London, 2008.

8 Cf. C. Berberich, 'This Green and Pleasant Land: Cultural Constructions of Englishness', [in:] *Landscape and Englishness*, R. Burden, S. Kohl (eds), Amsterdam–New York, 2006, pp. 207–224.

9 Ł. Drozda, *Dwa tysiące. Instrukcja obsługi polskiej urbanizacji w xxi wieku*, Warsaw, 2018, p. 23.

10 K. Kajdanek, 'Z punktu widzenia Drogi Mlecznej wszyscy jesteśmy ze wsi (Loesje)', [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, ed. W. Mazan, Warsaw, 2020, p. 50.

11 PROLOG+1, 'To, co znane, niekoniecznie jest poznane', [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, op. cit., p. 14.

12 K. Kajdanek, op. cit. p. 54.

the ‘spatial chaos’¹³ suggesting that the Polish countryside is not actually a countryside, but some variant of a phenomenon that Thomas Sieverts referred to as a *Zwischenstadt*,¹⁴ that is, an *intercity*¹⁵ or *almost-city*.¹⁶ The blame is usually placed on the lack of systemic solutions, in particular the lack of local spatial plans, and on the freedom of construction introduced by the 2003 Act on Planning and Spatial Development.¹⁷ Their particular outcomes of these processes include changing the status of farm land (from agricultural to residential) and the so-called ribbon farm construction style, which ‘precludes a rational way of shaping settlements, contributing to the production of a deeply disharmonious and non-functional urbanised space.’¹⁸ Great hopes were pinned on the so-called 2015 Landscape Act, but changes in terms of spatial management are very slow to implement.¹⁹ ‘Why is Poland so ugly?’ asked Piotr Sarzyński a decade ago.²⁰ There were many answers to that question, but the most common one concerned the need to ‘unwind’ after years of greyness and housing shortages, hence the bright colours of the façades of new and overhauled houses – giving rise to the phenomenon of the so-called *overpainted houses*,²¹ characterised by large sizes and fancy shapes.²² Filip Springer suggested that it was ‘a matter of landscape’. ‘The landscape here is usually painfully monotonous. ... Such a setting gives illusory hope that the land-

13 On the subject of ‘chaos’ as a concept, which carries negative emotions related to the experience of space in Poland, as well as expressing problems with defining the observed phenomenon, see: D. Leśniak-Rychlak, *Jesteśmy wreszcie we własnym domu*, Kraków, 2019, p. 8.

14 T. Sieverts, *Zwischenstadt: zwischen Ort und Welt, Raum und Zeit, Stadt und Land*, Wiesbaden, 1998, p. 7.

15 Ł. Drozda, op. cit., p. 23.

16 A. Bilewicz, ‘Państwo niedomiasto, czyli o prawie do wsi’, *Nowe Peryferie*, 5 August 2013, after: M. Kowalewski, ‘Niejednoznaczna odpowiedź miast na populizm i kryzys demokracji’, *Studia Socjologiczne*, 2019, no. 3 (234), p. 73.

17 Act on Planning and Spatial Development of 27 March, 2003. Dz. U. in particular [Journal of Laws] of 2003, no. 80 item 717.

18 Ł. Drozda, op. cit., p. 103.

19 Act of 24 April 2015 on amendments to certain laws in connection with the strengthening of landscape protection tools, Dz. U. [Journal of Laws] no. 2015, item 774.

20 P. Sarzyński, *Wrzask w przestrzeni. Dlaczego w Polsce jest tak brzydko?*, Warsaw, 2012.

21 M. A. Urbańska, ‘Marysia i Burek na Cejlonie: wiejska architektura egzotyczna’, [in:] *Hawaikum. W poszukiwaniu istoty piękna*, M. Kozień, M. Miskowicz, A. in particular Pankiewicz (eds.), Kraków, 2015, p. 43.

22 M. Arczyńska, ‘Polityka, prestiż i odreagowanie. Dom jednorodzinny w okresie transformacji’, [in:] *Polskie Las Vegas i szwagier z Corelem. Architektura, moda i projektowanie wobec transformacji systemowej w Polsce*, ed. L. Klein, Warsaw, 2017, p. 45.

scape can somehow be tamed or controlled, or at least that we can mark our presence in it. So we try to shout. ... This can be seen from a distance ... It resounds in the empty space ... The problem arises when the we need to provide some content in said shout.²³ Spatial chaos and flashy colours are some of the most striking and apparent features of the Polish countryside. However, it is the sham historicity of rural architecture and its stylistic cacophony that has become the subject of the most heated debates and a source of worry for proponents of a more modern or cosmopolitan architecture.

IN SEARCH OF A NATIONAL STYLE

The issue of searching for an indigenous style has been a constantly recurring theme in Polish architectural thought since at least the time of the Zakopane style, coined by Stanisław Witkiewicz. 'The Polish Block' – the communist-era design aptly named by Robert Konieczny, permanently deformed the Polish landscape. What is more, it represented a total departure from local architecture, which is why Marta A. Urbańska suggests renaming the design to 'the Exotic Block' – a visual testimony to the attempted modernisation of the countryside under the communist regime.²⁴ 'Countryside blocks of flats' – be it the Polish Blocks or larger structures erected adjacent to state farms, were harbingers of later changes that occurred in the aftermath of the political upheaval, when the modernisation of agricultural technology and improvements in general conditions went hand in hand with the adoption of architectural designs developed for the city as well as with urban and suburban lifestyles.

This modernisation also brought the attempts to reclaim the past, or at least to find a poor substitute for it. Houses built in Poland after 1989, which tried to emulate the manor house style or used often eclectic combinations of historical designs, were described by Janusz L. Dobesz as 'negative nativeness' – a concept that Marta Leśniakowska found in the architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁵ According to Dobesz, these houses, often derided as 'gargamels' – adorned with cupolas, corner extensions, and columned porticoes – deserve respect as an expression of the needs described by Dariusz Kozłowski in his declaration *Konieczność przeszłości* [*The Necessity of the Past*].²⁶ Dobesz

23 F. Springer, 'Brakujące słowo', [in:] *Hawaikum*, op. cit., p. 8.

24 M. A. Urbańska, op. cit., p. 40.

25 M. Leśniakowska, 'rodzimości negatywnej', [in:] *Architektura xix i początku xx wieku*, ed. T. Grygiel, pp. 127–135, after: J. L. Dobesz, *Dom polski*, Wrocław, 2008, p. 232.

26 D. Kozłowski, 'Konieczność przeszłości', [in:] *vi th International Biennale of Architecture – vi Międzynarodowe Biennale Architektury – Kraków '96*, Kraków, 1996.

considers Lech Wałęsa's villa designed by Szczepan Baum (1996-1997) to be an example of a successful attempt at eclecticism, where the character of the manor house and reference to local villa architecture are expressed in modern forms. In most cases, all kinds of forms that refer to the manor house style face criticism, just like homesteads emulating American designs showcased in various TV series, which are built to seem luxurious.²⁷ The issue with the modern rendition of the manor house is not only the scale of decorative elements, but also the omission of historical spatial arrangements of the surroundings of rural residences.²⁸ The attempts to bring back other national traditions, in particular folk ones, also face staunch criticism, with the most baffling examples being found in buildings designed for catering establishments. They showcase the issue of the superficial understanding of folklore. According to Monika Kozień: 'The phantasmatic approach to tradition is apparent from the very first glance at the architectural design of these buildings. Most of them are enormous in size. It does not matter whether they are supposed to emulate a manor house, a roadside inn or a country cottage – they are always upscaled and they utilise fanciful forms, bordering on palaces, with numerous stories, avant-corps, corner extensions, porches and mansards.'²⁹

There is a deep need for architecture that enters into dialogue with tradition, as evidenced by the design of the Licheń Basilica, described by its author – Barbara Bielecka – as both fully reflecting the *gusto Polacco* and drawing upon regional forms that appeal to a sense of local identity.³⁰ The perception of architecture referring to local traditions, aware of the inexpediency of searching for a national style that would be uniform for the whole country while drawing upon styles characteristic of a particular region, seems to be received somewhat more favourably.³¹ The 'small homelands' are thus supposed to be the spaces where – as Błażej Ciarkowski puts it – 'the dialogue between modernity, local construction culture and craftsmanship resounded most fully, often yielding interesting results', while pointing to the successful adaptations of traditional wooden architecture in the designs of churches in Pomerania, as designed by Szczepan Baum (citing the example of the church in Kąty Rybackie) and houses by Piotr Olszak and Jan Sabiniarz.³²

27 P. Sarzyński, op. cit., p. 35.

28 B. Ciarkowski, "Czas na restytucję polskiej sztuki". Architektura czasów transformacji wobec tradycji', [in:] *Polskie Las Vegas*, op. cit., p. 77.

29 M. Kozień, 'Egzotyczny koktajl z domieszką swojskości', [in:] *Hawaikum*, op. cit., p. 85.

30 M. Wiśniewski, 'W poszukiwaniu polskiego Las Vegas', [in:] *Polskie Las Vegas*, op. cit., p. 138.

31 K. Nawratek, *Ideologie w przestrzeni. Próby demistyfikacji*, Kraków, 2005, p. 97.

32 B. Ciarkowski, op. cit., p. 89.

It should be noted, however, that the widespread criticism of architecture seeking its origins in Polish tradition as an expression of national sentiment had a discouraging impact on architects, while creating a wide gap between the cosmopolitan taste of the architectural community and the needs of the general public concerning aesthetics and identity. These days, avoiding references to Polish building traditions can also be seen as an expression of the dread of the self-folklorisation, a phenomenon that rose to particular prominence in commercial architecture in the Podhale region especially, where it is mostly limited to ornamentation, detail, roof type or woodwork shapes. In these cases, the careful analysis of the local context and adaptation of the implemented project to its most important characteristics, including the spatial layout, wall colours and the materials used, is usually omitted. In other words, in the case of these designs, one can see superficial inspirations with folk style and folklore – just like in the case of ethnodesign, which is often focused on playing with traditional ornamentation, described by Ewa Klekot as ‘folkloristic interpretation of the countryside’³³ rather than searching for the ‘logic of locality’.³⁴ Just like in the case of numerous examples of ethnodesign, commercial folk-inspired architecture uses folklore only as a source of style, usually limited to ornamentation. According to Agnieszka Domańska, ethnodesign ignores ‘the contemporary culture of the countryside, while hearkening back to extinct traditions and styles, which function as a source of regional mementos.’³⁵ In addition to superficial interpretations of tradition, one can also find many designs that seemingly focus on folklore not as a product of ethnography but as a source of local architectural features and crafts as well as the materials, techniques, and spatial layouts employed in a given region. Below, the author outlines several examples of designs that were inspired by the local life, understood and interpreted as the totality of local traditions, ways of life, or spatial organisation, as opposed to folklore, which is understood as an ethnographic construct.

POLSKA ZAGRODA, OR THE POLISH FARMHOUSE

From the point of view of planning, one of the key issues of the Polish countryside is the disruption of the original spatial layouts and plans, usually stemming from the changing functions of the farmhouse.

33 E. Klekot, *Kłopoty ze sztuką ludową*, op. cit., p. 337.

34 M. Rydiger, ‘Lokalność zaprojektowana’, [in:] *Logika lokalności. Norweski i polski współczesny design*, ed. M. Daszewska, Kraków, 2016, pp. 17–26. Cf. E. Klekot, *Kłopoty ze sztuką ludową*, op. cit., p. 341.

35 A. Domańska, *Góralski etnodizajn czyli sztuka ludowa Podhala jako źródło inspiracji we współczesnym wzornictwie*, Gdańsk, 2019, p. 19.

According to Anna Górką, the resulting changes in homestead development, such as overhauls, result in the demolition of old farmhouse elements, that are replaced by suburban gardens surrounding the renovated residential buildings, which are modernised to the point of losing their traditional character.³⁶ The new developments does not relate to the local context in any way, neither from the architectural standpoint – usually simply copying the designs available in catalogues – nor in way they are embedded in the landscape and surroundings. According to Górką, these buildings are often ‘the only element on a plot of land haphazardly separated from an agricultural field.’³⁷ The author claims that these new buildings are ‘unsatisfactory’ and that they disregard the context of the location. She also believes that they are built as if they were devoid of any neighbourhood, surrounded by non-native vegetation and strange in the landscape, in many cases lacking the outbuildings that were used by countryside residents, such like woodsheds and farm outbuildings, which are replaced by a sprawling space used for parking personal vehicles.³⁸ The outcome of this trend is that this new type of development is gradually displacing traditional farmhouses, as even farmers recognise the superiority of aesthetic designs developed in cities. Given the total lack of oversight by central and local governments, the concern for preserving original layouts and designs falls onto the shoulders of newcomers from urban areas, who are pursuing their fantasy of idyllic life in the countryside and get involved in restoring old buildings, as well as to the architects whose work focuses on the issue of traditional architecture and the character of the Polish countryside.

The *Polish Farmhouse* project (2018) by BXB Studio Bogusław Barnaś³⁹ is a response to the apparent issue of the disappearance of traditional rural building layouts. In this case, the entire design stems from the adaptation of existing farmhouse buildings in such a way as to reflect the traditional layout while offering a more modern version. All that remains from the original farmhouse complex is one structure – the old house – which was preserved and restored. The other buildings, which were in poor shape, were demolished. In their stead, the studio created a single object made up of interconnected structures whose axes converge diagonally, rather than free-standing buildings reflecting the original layout of the

36 A. Górką, *Zagroda. Zagadnienia planowania i projektowania ruralistycznego*, Gdańsk, 2011, p. 23.

37 Ibidem.

38 Ibidem, p. 24.

39 Cf. description of the *Polish Farmhouse* on the BXB studio website, <<https://bxbstudio.com/project/polska-zagroda/?category=mieszkalne>> [accessed: 20.04.2022]. Cf. photographs of the project in: D. Łaski-Hamerlak, *Specjaliści od polskich stodół*, Designalive.pl, <<https://www.designalive.pl/polska-zagroda-od-bxb-studio/>> [accessed: 09.09.2022].

space. The final restored building is surrounded by a structure made up of five interconnected barns with different functions – garage, entrance area, children’s area and main hall, kitchen with offices and a two-storey living space. Each of them is characterised by a slightly different size and different wooden façade siding modules, whose style refers to the demolished farm buildings. The appearance and proportions of the fifth barn clearly imitate the form of the old barn that was located on the plot. The overall design alludes to the traditional layout and appearance of a rural home-stead, yet leaves no doubt about the contemporary character of the buildings while communicating careful consideration of the context of local buildings, terrain and vegetation. As Górká claimed, ‘successful attempts to reconcile the two trends – the traditional and the modern one – are exceedingly rare’, while noting that ‘the architectural community in Poland is clearly unable to design buildings that would fit well into the local natural, cultural and social context.’⁴⁰ Given this context, the *Polish Farmhouse* appears to be an exceptional design, just like other acclaimed projects by Barnaś’s studio, such as the *Polish House* and the award-winning *Lesser Polish Eaves Cottage* whose form alludes to the buildings in the market square of Lanckorona.⁴¹

The interest in the local aspects, which goes beyond clear references to folklore, may seem only a distant echo of post-modern returns to local context, ornamentation and regional specificity. After all, in the post-modern current of neo-vernacularism, local building traditions were also interpreted in new ways. Yet, while the motivation was often to create an environment that fit well into the familiar context, this local context was usually used superficially, and in some cases it was limited to the articulation and ornamentation of the façade (such as in the case of the famous Onder de Bogen estate project by Aldo van Eyck and Theo Bosch, completed in Zwolle between 1971 and 1975). The aforementioned projects by BXB Studio Bogusław Barnaś, however, follow a different path – the references to local building traditions are not too obvious – at least not to viewers, who are not familiar with Polish architecture and space. At first glance, the *Polish Farmhouse* takes advantage of a recognisable international idiom, which fits in with the popular trend of erecting rural home-steads and overhauling the existing ones as ‘modern barns’, including their characteristic features – exterior walls covered with wood, simple forms, dark colours, roofs without eaves; however, in the context of Polish rural space, its layout is immediately recognisable – in the case of Polish farm-

40 Ibidem, p. 38.

41 Cf. the description of the design on the BXB studio website, <<https://bxbstudio.com/project/chata-podcieniowa/>> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

houses, the outbuildings surrounding the house dominate the landscape, with the large and simple barn standing out the most.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

To conclude, let us go back to the *Trouble in Paradise* project mentioned at the beginning of the paper, which was showcased in the Polish Pavilion at the 2021 Venice Biennale of Architecture. The authors of the project – the PROLOG +1 group and an international team – not only pointed out the lack of architectural solutions for rural space in Poland, but also highlighted the fact that this issue is absent in the architectural discourse, as if the countryside was a space that was removed from the collective architectural consciousness.⁴² They note the absence of the issue of architecture inspired by the landed gentry and peasant tradition in professional magazines after 1989, focused almost exclusively on Western-type post-modern historicism.⁴³ Going beyond the prevalent albeit contradictory visions of the Polish countryside as a space of romantic idyll and technological utopia, the project created by PROLOG +1 asked the question of the relationship between space and models of its inhabitation, seeking material solutions and new forms of community, thus breaking with the perception of rural space as a ‘pre-modern ruin’ – a remnant of the old order, certain elements of which should be preserved in the form of an open-air museum while completely transforming the character of the remainder of it into an industrial space. The team also made an attempt to go beyond the mental patterns imposing the peripheral role of the countryside in relation to the metropolitan heart – the economic support for the urban civilisation.⁴⁴ From this point of view, the very topology of contemporary rural areas, described as ‘suburban’, ‘peripheral’, and in other terms, ultimately defines the diverse types of habitation as ‘non-urban’, thereby fostering exclusionary ideologies. Meanwhile, the changes observed in the countryside are complex and can originate at different points in the system of relations, which the authors of the project describe as horizontal – made up of a network of spatial units, such as territory, settlement, house.⁴⁵ In this system, various factors such as the state, free market or the city will never be the main drivers of change.

The exhibition showcased six proposals, which described the Polish countryside as a place of change, whose nature was not just spatial and architectural, but also social, stemming from the need to adapt to new

42 PROLOG+W, *To, co znane, niekoniecznie jest poznane*, op. cit., p. 11.

43 D. Leśniak-Rychlak, op. cit., p. 102.

44 P. Issaias, H. Khosravi, ‘Miejsce na zewnątrz: kilka refleksji na temat wiejskości, terytorium i obszarów wiejskich’, [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, op. cit., p. 17.

45 PROLOG +1, ‘Wieś na horyzoncie’, [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, op. cit., p. 105.



1

Fig. 1. Sacred Species, design by GUBAHÁMORI + Filip + László Demeter. Part of the design element of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the 2021 Biennale of Architecture.

2

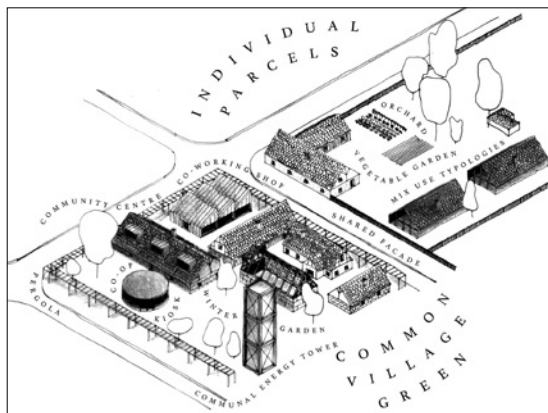


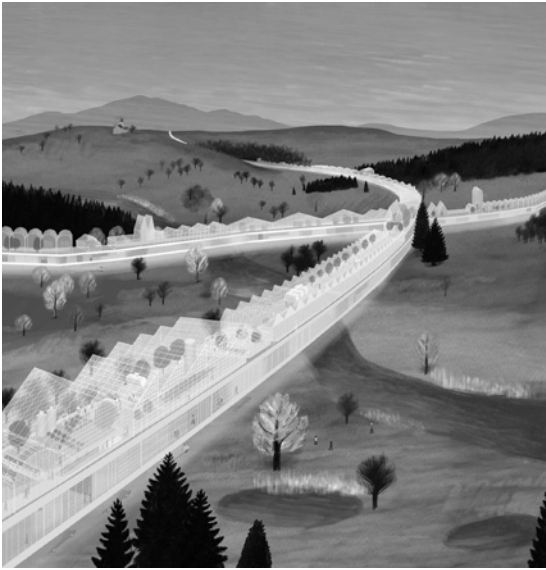
Fig. 2. Rural Communities, design by Atelier Fanelas. Part of the design element of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the 2021 Biennale of Architecture.

conditions resulting from climate change or the collapse of the growth-based economic development model. The *Święte gatunki* [*Sacred Species*] project (GUBAHÁMORI + Filip + László Demeter) assumes that trees will become the most privileged species on Earth, and that humans will adapt the shape and size of their habitats to them, building very tall, narrow houses on stilts to provide access to light (Fig. 1).⁴⁶ In this project, the traditional spatial arrangements of the Polish countryside are all but gone, and the thinking of architectural practice in terms of the continuation of building traditions loses its *raison d'être*. The landscape, which was predominantly anthropogenic, once again gets dominated by wilderness, where humans humbly find a place for themselves – not without the difficulties associated with it.

On the other hand, the *Wspólnoty wiejskie* [*Rural Communities*] project by Atelier Fanelas from Germany envisions the development of rural areas surrounding Szczecin, which would enable sharing communal green spaces in the heart of the village.⁴⁷ The settlement – home to three hundred residents – encompasses three types of space: a central

46 'Święte gatunki', [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, op. cit., p. 187.

47 'Wspólnoty wiejskie', [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, op. cit., pp. 200–201.



3

Fig. 3. Agrostructure, project by kosmos Architects. Part of the design element of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the 2021 Biennale of Architecture.

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Il. 4. Social Infrastructure, project by RZUT. Part of the design element of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the 2021 Biennale of Architecture.

common green area, individual plots of land, as well as the surrounding fields and pastures. The buildings reflect the original structures and the traditional farmhouse layout (Fig. 2). The way of living in the countryside drives the emergence of new lifestyles based on self-sufficiency, as well as shared food and energy production. Self-sufficiency and a community-based living model is also the starting point of the *Spółem* project by the UK-based Rural Office for Architecture, which draws on the long-standing Polish tradition of collective farming and on Oskar Hansen's concept of Open Form⁴⁸ in the approach to spatial planning. It takes into account planning at the state level, construction of settlements at the cooperative level and adaptation of individual homes at the personal level, seeking a balance between the shared and the private, while taking into account needs such as access to common areas free of vegetation. Interestingly enough, the project also features the Polish practice of erecting buildings of different sizes and purposes at different stages of construction.⁴⁹

On the other hand, projects such as *Agrostruktura* [Agrostructure] by Kosmos Architects and *Infrastruktura społeczna* [Social Infrastructure] by Polish studio Rzut envisage a complete departure from traditional architecture. The former assumes that the existing road network will remain in place, entirely built up with three-storey buildings along their entire length,

48 'Spółem', [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, op. cit., pp. 220–221.

49 Ibidem, p. 227.

with the first story designated for transport, the second for housing, and the third for common spaces and greenhouse crops (Fig. 3).⁵⁰ All the land around the residential, agricultural and transport areas would remain unused, allowing residents to get in touch with nature. This is a complete departure from the rural way of living in favour of being close to transportation and public institutions, which is characteristic of the city, and towards a closer relationship with the community, collectively engaged in farming and production. New social relations, emerging as a result of adaptation to a new type of infrastructure, also appear in the design by Rzut, where a rural space is transformed into a large green power plant (Fig. 4).⁵¹ Energy production and distribution networks are becoming a driver of change in space and its utilisation.

In her book *Wreszcie jesteśmy we własnym domu*, Dorota Leśniak-Rychlak wrote that ‘although we are talking about the spatial order ... it is not beauty that is the actual issue at hand – it is the economics’, pointing out that focusing the debate on personal tastes does not elucidate anything – it actually muddies the picture.⁵² She notes that the concern for beauty and aesthetics in Poland often conceals a longing for ‘modernist world order’,⁵³ which on many levels is nothing but a classism-motivated need to exclude the Polish/rural Other from the elite community of good taste, often shaped by Western and Nordic models. The various euphemistic descriptions of the Polish rural architectural landscape as ‘unsatisfactory’ (to whom?) or ‘chaotic’, which appear in scholarly studies and reports, as well as the mentions of ubiquitous ‘ugliness’ cited in this paper, effectively distract everybody from the most relevant aspects of the issues with the Polish countryside. Leśniak-Rychlak suggests looking at economic and ecological issues and considering whether the contemporary model of ‘spatial development is sustainable and tenable in the context of climate catastrophe’.⁵⁴ The *Trouble in Paradise* project also makes it clear that considerations about the aesthetics of the space of the Polish countryside may soon become completely irrelevant and give way to the need to adapt to a changing climate and develop new models of social life that will guarantee effective adaptation.

50 ‘Agroskultura’, [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, op. cit., pp. 210–211.

51 ‘Infrastruktura społeczna’, [in:] *Trouble in Paradise*, op. cit., pp. 230–231.

52 D. Leśniak-Rychlak, op. cit., p. 42.

53 Ibidem, p. 112.

54 Ibidem, p. 118.

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Abstract:

The paper undertakes considerations on the contemporary condition of rural architecture. The eponymous ‘issue with the countryside’ concerns both the widely criticised character of Polish architecture and rural areas, lambasted in literature and trade magazines, as well as a reference to two publications discussed in the text, released in 2020-2021 *Kłopoty ze sztuką ludową* by Ewa Klekot and *Trouble in Paradise*, published in connection with the exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture. The paper includes a summary of the main threads of discussion surrounding the architecture of the Polish countryside and the accusations levelled against it, such as the disruption of traditional spatial order by new construction, the superficial drawing on the tradition of the Polish manor house, and the superficial character of folk inspirations. Against this background, the author discussed two designs, which are distinguished by their approach to the Polish tradition of rural architecture: the *Polska Zagroda* (Polish Farmhouse) by BXB Studio Bogusław Barnaś, inspired by traditional Polish homestead, as well as the designs presented at the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture.

Keywords:

architecture, Polish countryside, folklore, local

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