The Importance of Architectural Heritage for the Quality of Urban Life on Selected Examples of Polish Towns †

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† Presented at the 9th Innovations-Sustainability-Modernity-Openness Conference (ISMO’20), Bialystok, Poland, 20–21 May 2020.
Published: 20 August 2020

Abstract: In recent years, the importance of architectural heritage as a factor in urban development and improving the quality of life of residents has increased in Poland. Protection and use of historic architecture should be in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. The potential for historical architecture can then be fully exploited. The above topics were discussed based on examples of small towns in the Podlaskie Voivodeship.

Keywords: architectural heritage; cultural heritage; sustainable urban development

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development has changed during the several dozens of years of its functioning, both in theoretical and practical fields, with pressure placed on its various aspects, in relation to time and place. The general definition of sustainable development, created at the concept development stage, remains in the Brundtland Commission Report of 1987 [1]. It defines sustainable development as meeting the needs of the modern generation without limiting the development opportunities of future generations. In relation to urban organisms, the idea of sustainable development is visible primarily in two fields. One concerns the spatial development of the city, the other focuses on the quality of life in the city [2].

The quality of life in the city can be considered in various aspects. It is important, for example, to provide healthy and safe living and working conditions, promote public transport, reduce the negative impact of industrial production on the quality of the urban environment, and many other key factors. There are also fields inextricably linked to the broadly understood concept of quality of life in the city, but many of these defy attempts to quantify them. In recent decades there has been a change in the perception of culture, with its increased importance for socio-economic development, especially where the principles of sustainable development are taken into account [3]. An important area is a broadly understood cultural heritage of the past, with its most legible material element in architectural heritage. The idea of protecting monuments, from inception, assumed the preservation of objects of the past for future generations. In this general assumption, the protection of monuments is, therefore, consistent with the general objectives of the concept of sustainable development of the city, as having an intergenerational link between the past and the future.

Many cities, especially those with an extent history, are recognizable primarily due to their architectural monuments. Historical monuments actively participate in urban life and are an integral part of their spatial structure. This is typical in cities that are considered attractive to tourists. It seems that in smaller towns this potential is not fully utilized. There are still large areas of activity in the
field of architectural heritage. Protection of architectural monuments, carried out in accordance with the professional conservation art, thus falls under the concept of sustainable development [4].

2. Description of the Issue

Podlaskie Voivodeship is one of 16 voivodeships in Poland. There are 40 cities within the voivodeship, with Białystok, its largest city of over 300,000 residents, as its capitol. The next two cities in terms of size are Suwałki (about 70,000 inhabitants) and Łomża (about 63,000 residents). Around 36 cities have less than 30,000 residents; the smallest of them (Suraż) has less than a thousand inhabitants. Many of these small towns have a rich history and a significant cultural heritage, which plays an increasingly important role in the development of these cities. It brings image and economic benefits and increases the quality of life of the residents.

Three different cities in terms of size and economic condition were selected for analysis: Tykocin, Supraśl, and Bielsk Podlaski. The largest of them is Bielsk Podlaski with about 25,000 residents. The second is Supraśl—about 2600 inhabitants. The smallest is Tykocin—less than 2000 inhabitants. Tykocin is a city of great touristic importance, and Supraśl has the status of a spa town. Bielsk Podlaski is an important administrative and industrial center. These are cities with a rich history with significant historic complexes [5].

Historical city centers and other fragments of preserved traditional buildings located outside the center, sometimes even on the outskirts of the city, were chosen for analysis. The research drew attention to the importance of monuments and historic complexes in contemporary urban tissue. Attention was also paid to the importance of architectural heritage for the quality of urban spaces and for the development of the city in cultural and economic aspects, among others as a tourist product. An important element of the study was to determine the importance of architectural heritage for the sustainable development of the cities.

As part of the research, bibliographic and archival queries (municipal public library in Białystok, archives of the voivodship conservator in Białystok and others, as well as publications and information available online) were carried out. Field studies were performed (in situ). Then, the obtained research material was compared with the results of bibliographic and archival research. Then, the final conclusions were formulated.

3. Results

All cities examined have a rich history—it is legible in each city in the form of an urban layout and a significant stock of historic buildings.

The importance of architectural heritage is different for each city. In small cities, the impact of architectural heritage on economic and cultural development, and consequently on the quality of life of residents, is greater (Tykocin, also Supraśl). However, it is smaller in larger cities (Bielsk Podlaski).

Small cities, without an industrial base and greater administrative significance, due to their architectural heritage, actively participate in the social and cultural life of the region (mainly Tykocin).

Out of the center in each of the cities studied, often on the periphery, there are many less significant, but interesting, historical architectural objects. They are mainly wooden houses. They were built in the nineteenth century and mostly in the twentieth century. Individual objects are older. They are a characteristic element of the historical cultural landscape of the cities in question.

4. Conclusions

The quality of life of city dwellers can be considered in various aspects. In times of globalization, diversity of the material environment is an important element of human life. Architectural monuments give the city’s landscape unique features by helping to preserve the historical identity of cities.

Preservation of the historical urban layout and architectural monuments is not only important from a conservation point of view. It is a factor affecting the broadly understood quality of life of the inhabitants of the cities in question. Therefore, care for architectural heritage is very important. The state of its preservation translates into the possibilities of its use.
Small cities that are not industrial and administrative centers should pay particular attention to the use of architectural heritage potential. Monuments bring significant financial benefits, among others by generating tourist traffic. They also inspire the creation of various cultural events, diversifying the cultural life of the city’s inhabitants.

The potential of architectural heritage is still not fully utilized. The attention of municipal authorities, private individuals, and conservation services is focused on the most important historic buildings. This is right and obvious. However, the buildings of these cities, usually located outside the center, have values that have still not been fully shown. In all the analyzed cities we find traces of architectural heritage, which on the surface can hardly be called monuments. Most of these modest buildings, often wooden houses, are located outside city centers or in suburban areas. Only some of them are under conservation protection. However, all these objects more clearly refer to local traditions and local conditions. They make up the unique urban landscape [6,7]. These architectural objects can be used to complement the tourist offer and promotion of the city. Some attempts to use this potential are already visible. For example, a wooden architecture trail was created in Tykocin a few years ago. It mainly consists of historic wooden houses.

The city’s identity, its genius loci, is the result of the interaction of history and modernity. The individual character of the place is created in this interaction. Polish landscape researcher J. T. Królikowski put it well: “Not only is the town created from the logic of thought but also from the depth of feelings. Consciously or unconsciously, with premeditation or intuitionally, a human creates own space, revealing own needs, hope, faith and values” [8].

Acknowledgments: The research was carried out as part of research work No. WZ/WA-IA/3/2020 at the Białystok University of Technology and financed from a subsidy provided by the Minister of Science and Higher Education.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict interest.

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