Wooden Orthodox Church Architecture in A Country Landscape After World War II - In the Area of the Former Eastern Galicia

Jan Kurek

1 Cracow University of Technology - Faculty of Architecture, Poland
pakurek@cyf/kr.edu.pl

Abstract. For hundreds of years, villages and small towns - dominating in the Polish landscape - were built in wood, with dominant monuments crystallizing in the form of iconic buildings. The attachment to the local tradition was prevailing - opposing foreign influences. Foreign influences usually underwent modification and specific "taming" in the existing cultural environment. Among the wooden temples of south-eastern Poland distinguish Greek Catholic churches, which are characterized by a great variety of architectural forms. Their specificity has its genesis in the place of their formation - it is the borderline of the Latin and Byzantine cultural circle. It was also here that the influences of numerous, ethnically diverse regions of Poland, Russia, Slovakia (Upper Hungary), Bukovina, Moldova, etc., were crossed. Forced displacement of the Rusins (Ukrainian) population from her previous places of residence, has condemned to leave and exterminate nearly 300 wooden temples - not counting many ruined villages. Few valuable wooden churches were surrounded by conservation and restored. Originally wooden churches, usually with roofs and walls covered with shingles, topped with intricately wrought iron crosses, were usually located on small hills, surrounded by old linden trees or oaks. They were accompanied by wooden or stone fences, wooden belfries and picturesque gates. The square of the church, some distance from the center of the village, accompanied the daily life of local communities. It was a constant and "homely" element of a rural or small-town landscape. In renovations or in the construction of a few new church buildings at the turn of the 20th and 21st century, new materials were increasingly sought after - especially using steel sheets to cover roofs and walls. Today, thanks to the support of the conservation authorities, the traditional cover is restored to the church. Some of the churches that survived the turmoil of war, today are deprived of care and only the most valuable objects are undergoing renovations. Thanks to joint efforts of Poland and Ukraine, the group of the most valuable surviving wooden orthodox churches was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

1. Introduction
For hundreds of years' villages and small towns—which dominate the Polish landscape—were built out of timber, with landmarks in the form of religious and secular buildings that crystallised the plans of individual localities. Residential buildings accumulated around the temples and market squares of cities and small towns. Attachment to local tradition was predominant in architecture—its strength significantly resisted outside influence. Outside influences were usually subjected to local modifications and a certain "domestication" within the extant cultural environment.
Today we view historical buildings as an element of both tangible and intangible heritage. Architectural conservation is thus a problem that is much broader, covering the area within which a given structure - a given historical structure is located. Hence, it is the cultural landscape that should be subjected to conservation along with the surrounding natural landscape, historical buildings and greenery. In this context, the placement of a temple building - whether in the centre of a locality (village or town) or on its edge - will be of high significance.

Greek-Catholic churches, orthodox churches, which are characterised by a high variety of architectural forms stand out in particular among the timber temples of southeast Poland. Their specificity has its origin in the place of their construction, it is the border between the Latin and Byzantine cultural circles. It was also the place of the intertwining of influences of numerous ethnically diverse regions of Poland, Russia, Slovakia (Upper Hungary), Bukovina, Moldova, etc.
Figure 3. Europe - Carpathians region, diversification of wooden churches forms depending on the region in which they were created. /made by author/

2. Wooden orthodox churches after the Second World War
The end of the Second World War brought with it great changes to the outline of previous state borders and radical changes in population structure. The forced resettlement of people of Ukrainian origin (Ruthenians) from their previous places of residence condemned over 300 timber temples—not counting many ruined villages—to abandonment and extermination.

Figure 4. Examples of temples abandoned after World War II and ruined in the 1990s: 
a) – Krowica, b) – Wierzbica. /photo author/
Only a few precious timber orthodox churches were placed under architectural conservation and subjected to necessary refurbishment in the 1960's. The majority of timber orthodox churches, along with the plots of land attached to them, were transferred by the government of the PRL to the Roman Catholic Church, which adapted them to the role of parish or filial churches. The abandoned and neglected Greek-Catholic cemeteries—often either deliberately or thoughtlessly devastated and successively overgrowing with bushes and young trees—became a separate and equally significant problem. Some orthodox churches were transferred to Orthodox parishes.

Figure 5. Students of architecture are working on documenting wooden churches and in ordering and cleaning Greek Catholic cemeteries in south-eastern Poland. /photo author 2010-2014/

1 Kurek J., Sacrum i mentalność w kształtowniu świątyń Kościoła Wschodniego na przykładzie drewnianych cerkwi województwa przemyskiego, Politechnika Krakowska, monografia 2017, Kraków 1997.
3. Wooden churches and the landscape
Timber orthodox church buildings, typically wit roofs and walls covered in shingles and crowned by meticulously wrought iron crosses, were usually placed on small hills, surrounded (years afterwards) by old linden or oak trees. They were accompanied by timber bell towers (typically detached), timber or stone fences and picturesque gates. Cemeteries with graves marked by distinct stone crosses were placed in the vicinity of the religious complexes.

![Figure 6](image)

Figure 6. Teams of wooden church architecture are organically connected with the landscape—with free-standing bellfries, cemeteries and old trees. /photo author/

Complexes of timber orthodox church architecture are organically connected with the landscape—especially the rural landscape and its appropriate regions. Some use the term "sacral landscape" to describe it, for the diversity and wealth of its architectural forms and detail wonderfully corresponds with the—often picturesque—landscape surrounding a temple. These sacral religious complexes are characterised by a peculiar synergy of the mutual influence of the sacrum of the temple and the sacrum of Nature. These complexes form a space of high aesthetic and spiritual qualities—a space whose source lies in the centuries-long tradition of building out of timber and a deep tradition of faith. The beauty and charm of the sacral landscape and the atmosphere of temple interiors are the deciding factor in their significance among the faithful, in addition to playing a significant role in the tourism-related promotion of a given locality and the region associated with it.

Landscapes, in general, are divided into natural and anthropogenic ones. The latter include cultural landscapes—agricultural, pastoral, settled rural, settled urban, forest, mining, industrial, tourism-focused, religious, etc., as well as anthropic landscapes—which are decayed landscapes.

---

2 Kozak H., Kozak I., Stępień A., *Krajobraz sakralny na przykładzie wsi Potoleyecz na Roztoczu*, in: *Krajobrazy pogranicza kulturowego*, Prace Komisji Krajobrazu Kulturowego Iss. 19, Sosnowiec 2013.

3 Ibidem, p. 139.
The **sacral landscape**, also called a religious landscape, represents a type of landscape of the areas in which sacrum manifests itself or those landscapes which fulfil religious functions⁴. The sacral landscape is thus being shaped by cultural factors which are an expression of the development of human needs of a higher order, which are being satisfied through the presence and influence of natural elements and/or cultural (worship-related) structures that serve the affirmation of godheads (God)⁵. There are also sacral-religious landscapes with deliberately introduced material elements (objects of worship) that primarily serve the performing of religious practices—e.g. Calvary paths. Timber temples of the eastern rite are currently an important element of rural (or sometimes urban) settled and seminatural⁶ landscapes.

![Image of Chotyniec wooden temple](image)

**Figure 7.** Chotyniec—an object on the UNESCO World Heritage List—wooden temples of the Eastern rite are an important element of rural (or sometimes urban) landscapes of settlement and seminatural landscapes. /photo author/

### 4. Perception of wooden temples in the landscape

The shape and decoration of the interior of a temple played a significant role in influencing the psyche of the faithful—ones that were nevertheless contemplated sporadically, during services or church

---

⁴ Myga-Piątek U., *Krajobrazy sakralne i religijne – próba umiejscowienia w typologii krajobrazów kulturowych*, in: *Sacrum w krajobrazie*, Prace Komisji Krajobrazu Kulturowego Iss. 17, Sosnowiec 2012, p. 16.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 20.

⁶ - with both natural and artificial characteristics.
holidays. The timber material and its natural character as a building element associated with the timber buildings of villages and small towns that used to be common and that played a dominant role within the Polish landscape for close to a thousand years. Timber temples, timber farms and timber small-town houses integrated very well with the surrounding "green" natural landscape, as well as the cultural landscape.

The deciding factor in the perception of a sacral complex—of its formal and spiritual impact—was primarily that of matter and form. This is why the outline of an orthodox church's massing and of its accompanying bell tower were of such high significance, as it enabled individualisation and easy identification within the local context. The fundamental impact of the form of the outline of an orthodox church was exerted primarily by the shape and structure of the covering of its individual spaces—e.g. in the form of the roof of the domes or the pyramidal multi-level stepped gables. We can thus assume that it was the exterior profile of the whole that was of the greatest significance here. The elements of architectural detail—the decorated cantilevers, galleries, arcades, decorated doors—portals, strongly protruding small roofs protecting the walls of the bottom level, ridge turrets, decorative wrought crosses, etc.—were only visible after coming closer to a structure.

Figure 8. Potylicz, Ukraine—the shape and design of the roofing of individual church spaces determines its individual "external profile". /photo author/

5. Placement—location
The temple square—the sacralised vicinity of an orthodox church, both in the centre and at a certain distance from the centre of a village or town—accompanied the daily life of local communities. It was a permanent—almost "homelike”—fixture of the rural and small-town landscape. In the urban landscape timber religious buildings gave way to masonry buildings—which were more durable and resistant to fires which used to be more frequent in the past—relatively quickly.
Sometimes the most precious historical timber buildings are relocated to a new place—to open-air museums—where their surroundings are appropriately shaped (e.g. through the formation of the neighbouring buildings and low-lying and tall greenery).

Figure 9. Orthodox church from Rosolin moved to the open-air ethnographic museum in Sanok.

6. Current conservation problems
Contemporaneity increasingly often affects the forms and detail of timber temples (e.g. their cladding, new crosses and ridge towers), gradually robbing them of their former "beauty". At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century the Austrian authorities ordered the use of non-flammable roof surfaces and so zinc-covered steel sheets appeared in place of the traditional shingles. Towards the end of the twentieth century this material was used increasingly often during the refurbishment of orthodox church buildings to cover roofs and walls (e.g. in Ukraine). In orthodox church interiors, in turn, there appeared "elegant" lacquered wood finishes that were alien to them—only in places where refurbishment is financially supported by conservation authorities that traditional shingle surfaces and sometimes the boarding of walls is being programmatically reintroduced.

Meticulous conservatory renovations are currently carried out on the oldest and most precious structures. In 2013, thanks to the joint efforts of Poland and Ukraine, a group of the most precious preserved timber orthodox churches was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage Site List. A total of 16 structures was placed on the list, with 8 located in each country. They present different architectural types, such as: The Hutsul type, the Halych type, the Boyko type and the Lemko type. Thanks to this entry, the heritage of timber orthodox church architecture has gained an important role in the promotion of tourism, as well as in historical, construction-related and artistic education.

Religious buildings are always connected with their surroundings, even when they are monasteries, chapels or hermitages located far from human settlements. At times the current cultural landscape undergoes gradual decay and disintegration (Ządąbrowie). The fundamental problem in saving orthodox churches and their surroundings—the historical context—is their use by the local community
and providing access to them to visiting tourists. Only a few of the structures are currently "remotely" managed by local—district museums (e.g. Radruż) and open-air museums (e.g. Ulucz). Constant maintenance and accessibility is only available in the case of temples (western and orthodox churches) that have been relocated to open-air museums.

Figure 10. Radruż, Poland—wooden orthodox church—the shape and ornamentation of the interior of the temple played a large role in influencing the psyche of the faithful. /photo author/

References

[1] Bujak A., Szczucka A., Świątynia – rzecz o budowlach sakralnych różnych wyznań w Polsce, Temple - a thing about sacral buildings of various denominations in Poland, Warszawa 1993, s.5.
[2] Kozak H., Kozak I., Stępień A., Krajobraz sakralny na przykładzie wsi Potelycz na Roztoczu, A sacral landscape on the example of the village of Potelycz on Roztocze, in: Krajobrazy pogranicza kulturowego, Prace Komisji Krajobrazu Kulturowego Iss. 19, Sosnowiec 2013.
[3] Kornecki M., Drewniana architektura sakralna w Polsce – zagadnienie typów i form regionalnych w rozwoju historycznym, Wooden sacred architecture in Poland - the issue of regional types and forms in historical development, in Ochrona Zabytków 45/1-2 (176-177), s. 7.
[4] Kurek J., Sacrum i mentalność w kształtowaniu świątyń Kościoła Wschodniego na przykładzie drewnianych cerkwi województwa przemyskiego, Sacrum and mentality in shaping the temples of the Eastern Church on the example of the wooden church of the Przemyśl province, Politechnika Krakowska, monografia 2017, Kraków 1997.
[5] Kurek J., Drewniane dzwonnice cerkiewne Ziemi Przemyskiej, Wooden church belfries of the Przemyśl region, KMB Press, Katowice 2013.