HISTORIC TOWN - IDEA AND SENSE OF IDENTITY

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Abstract

This article addresses the problem of preserving the identity and historic cultural landscape in small towns in southern Poland. Nowadays, the unique character of those centers is frequently endangered by uncontrolled development and a drive towards modern architectonic and technological solutions. Inhabitants of these small towns, or centers currently reduced to the role of districts, do not always feel or understand the need for preserving the values of their little homelands, even though they bear evidence of a rich past and cultural potential. This work presents a few selected examples of small towns in southern Poland, some of which were degraded to the rank of districts at the beginning of the 20th century. Their landscape and cultural potential have been presented, and attention was drawn to the issue of protecting the historic heritage which has so far survived in the given area. Finally, the identity of selected towns and the sense of a struggle to maintain it have been addressed.

Introduction

Currently, there are around 900 towns in Poland. Central Statistical Office divides them according to the number of their inhabitants into: cities with at least a million inhabitants; with the population between 500 000 and 999 999 inhabitants; between 200 000 and 499 999; between 100 000 and 199 999; between 40 000 and 99 999; between 20 000 and 39 999; between 10 000 and 19 999; between 5000 and 9999; between 2500 and 4999, and those below 2500 inhabitants¹. There is also a group of centres which for various reasons lost their

¹ www.stat.gov.pl (20.03.2016)
town rank in the 19th and 20th century, and nowadays are rural districts, but the character of their functional-spatial structure and urban layout still allow to regard them as towns. The majority of the above mentioned centres are historic structures with rich tradition, cultural landscape and historic heritage. Those elements have influenced the identity of those centres which, in turn, defines their character, local colour and uniqueness. Unfortunately, in many cases the identity is weakened or even erased because of uncontrolled spatial, architectonic and technological development. Measures ought to be taken to counter the latter phenomenon, since the identity is inextricably linked with the very idea of the town existence.

The article presents the issue of preserving the identity and the historic cultural landscape within selected small towns in southern Poland, such as: Skawina, Rabka Zdroj, Nowy Korczyn and Sieniawa. The chosen centres boast interesting and eventful history as well as historic buildings and cultural landscape, which constitute their identity. Unfortunately, in many cases characteristic elements of their cultural landscape have gradually been degraded in favour of e.g. anonymous architecture. Those towns lack a complex vision of their development – a vision based also on making use of their valuable historic elements. It is important for local communities to see the need to maintain and continue traditional building techniques, building materials, object proportions and colour schemes. It is also important to maintain spatial proportions, urban interiors, greenery etc.

The historic heritage of the presented centres is a vital cultural medium. It can also become a “tourist product” which, in turn, constitutes a link to the widely understood town development and economic success that is followed by strengthening the town’s position in the region.

It has already been mentioned, that four urban centres were chosen to outline the above described issues. They are small towns, but rich in historic traditions, though differing from one another. The examples were selected from among numerous urban centres in southern Poland. They are representative for the issues that can currently be observed – problems connected with preservation of identity as well as protection and revalorization of cultural landscape.

Figure 1. Map of a fragment of southern Poland with marked location of analysed towns
The first of the analysed historic towns is Skawina, a town with the population of 20 thousand, located in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship, approximately 15 km to the south – west of Krakow. The town was established in the Middle Ages (founded in 1364) by King Kazimierz Wielki. The existence of defensive walls in the town and a castle of considerable significance for the defensive system of the Polish kingdom dates back to that period. The town is situated on the right bank of the Skawinka River along which the then border between the Duchy of Oświęcim-Zator and Poland of Kazimierz Wielki ran during the medieval period. Locating a town with a fortified castle in this area and a customs house on the border was an important link in the defence of the newly-established state (after the period of feudal fragmentation). That modern centre also served as a local venue for bartering commodities, therefore a rectangular market square surrounded by a strip of building blocks was measured out in the town, and a parish church was erected\(^2\).

During the next centuries the town buildings developed further. Masonry tenement houses, a brewery, and a hospital church were erected, and at the turn of the 19th and 20th century the first factory representing interesting industrial architecture was built. Since that time, traditions of medieval Skawina mingled with traditions of an industrial town only to become obliterated in the 2nd half of the 20th century. The town became anonymous, and by many was only negatively associated with heavy industry i.e. the Aluminium Works (opened in 1954), Skawina Power Plant and other factories. The identity of this medieval town, the sense and origin of its foundation lost their significance. It is only recently that the roots have been rediscovered anew and the potential of historic heritage of Skawina has been noticed. The market square and some tenement houses have been revalorised. The building of “Sokół” erected at the turn of the 19th and 20th century on the site of a medieval fortress of Kazimierz Wielki has been restored. The medieval parish church has also been modernised. This return to the sense of the town history and its identity can also be seen in the attempt at passing the values of the native cultural landscape on to the young generation.

For this purpose, numerous exhibitions, talks and lectures in which the town history and its monuments are presented have been organised. In recent years historical monographs of the town have also been written, documenting its past, traditions and monuments. As a result of the above described revalorisation work and other activities intended to preserve the town identity, “label” of an industrial town is becoming more and more obliterated in the local community awareness, superseded by the traditions of an urban centre with medieval origins.

\(^2\) Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2012, passim.
**Figure 2.** Centre of Skawina on the orthophotomap

*Source:* Photo: W. Gorgolewski.

**Figure 3.** Revalorised market square in Skawina and town hall

**Figure 4.** Revalorised building of the former “Sokół” in Skawina


**Figure 5.** Parish church of St. Simon and Jude in Skawina

**Figure 7 Church of Our Lady in Skawina**

A slightly different example of a historic town possessing its own identity, though today unfortunately seriously endangered, is Rabka Zdrój. It is, at the same time, an example of issues associated with preservation of cultural landscape, which are currently noticeable in other Polish health resorts.

Rabka Zdrój as a health resort was established in the 19th century in the area between the Gorce range and Beskid Wyspowy range, in the south of the Lesser Poland Voivodeship. However, the roots of the settlement date back to the medieval period. Then, in the year 1254, King Bolesław Wstydliwy confirmed the endowment of the Cistercian monastery in Szczyrzyc, which included salt springs in the vicinity of Ludźmierz that historians identify with the later Rabka. Officially the place became a health resort in 1864, and the initiator of it was Julian Zubrzycki. Four iodine-bromine salt springs: “Rafaela”, “Maria”, “Krakus” and “Kazimierz” functioned there at the time. The centre of the health resort with such facilities as e.g. Spa House, a promenade, a chemist’s and a restaurant, was located in their close proximity. It was here that the first pensions were built, initially mostly wooden, later masonry. These buildings had features characteristic for traditional architecture of the Podhale region, at the same time alluding to the current European models³.

Currently, the majority of these pensions are in poor state of preservation, and their use is incidental. Therefore, the cultural landscape of this famous spa is in danger. The identity of Rabka is disappearing along with its spa town architecture with historic details and traditional building materials. There are no clear-cut models of contemporary architectonic realisations which would skilfully fit into the historic environment. It is crucial for both town residents and local authorities to perceive the need for preserving the cultural landscape and its elements. Town development can go hand in hand with respecting historic values, the more so as those values remain the town’s greatest asset.

The process of Rabka’s revalorisation is inevitable since the town is currently state of stagnation. The process is complex since it overlaps with unfavourable phenomena e.g. connected with deteriorating quality of air which influences e.g. the loss of values related to the town’s health-resort function. Therefore, in order to save Rabka, the programme of its revalorisation has to include several investments that will improve its climate. Only then will the town have a chance to regain its former value of a children’s health resort and be again attractive for tourists and patients.

³ Beiersdorf, Krasnowolski, 1982, passim.
Figure 8. Centre of Rabka-Zdroj on orthophotomap.

Source: Photo: [in:] Geoportal

Figure 9. Building of the colony of St. Louis Children’s Hospital in Rabka-Zdroj

Figure 10. Villa “Luboń” in Rabka-Zdroj

Source: Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2015

Figure 11. Villa “Warszawa” in Rabka-Zdroj, Figure 12. Villa “Wawel” in Rabka-Zdroj.

Source: Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2015
The third example, worth describing, is the former town of Nowy Korczyn located in the Ponidzie region, in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, where it borders on the Lesser Poland Voivodeship. Since the time of its foundation which took place in the mid-13th century, until the 17th century, Nowy Korczyn used to be one of the most important towns in the then Lesser Poland, the evidence of which are the monuments preserved to the present day, in the form of two churches: the post-Franciscan one of St. Stanislaus from 1257, and the church of the Holy Trinity from the 16th century; an 18th-century synagogue, a medieval market square and relics of historic buildings around the market square⁴. Nowadays it is an almost forgotten and neglected centre with partially preserved relics of its eventful past.

The beginnings of organised settlement in the area of the later town date back to the 11th century. A trade settlement existed here, located along the route leading from Krakow to Sandomierz. In 1226 in Korczyn was born duke Bolesław Wstydliwy, which confirms that a ducal court must have existed here earlier. In 1258, the monarch issued a privilege granting the town rights to Nowy Korczyn, thus contributing to its rapid development to which a favourable location at the crossroads of trade routes and a close proximity to the ducal court also contributed. In the 14th century, King Kazimierz Wielki built a masonry castle in Nowy Korczyn, which was visited by almost all Polish rulers in the next centuries. The town also served as a venue for political rallies and meetings of the nobility. A town hall, a town hospital, baths and a water pipeline existed here, which bore evidence of the residents’ affluence.

A gradual decline of Nowy Korczyn started in the 17th century and was caused by e.g. transferring the state capital from Krakow to Warsaw, which weakened the political role of the Lesser Poland nobility⁵. During the following centuries the town never regained its former position. It was continually harassed by enemy raids, scourges by numerous plagues and fires. After the Partitions, Nowy Korczyn found itself under the Russian occupation which led to its loss of town rights in the year 1869. This once bustling town is nowadays sadly neglected. Relics of its rich past are the previously mentioned monuments, old buildings vanishing before our eyes and the medieval market square. The progress of civilisation and the not fully controlled development have a negative impact on the cultural landscape of this unique town, which has been pointed out by the authors of the article. What seems to be lacking is a concept for revalorising the historic space and a simultaneous tourist activation of the town. Paradoxically, it is the cultural landscape and the eventful past of Nowy Korczyn that offer the town a chance of development.

⁴ Ginalska, 1999, p. 68.
⁵ Przybyszewski, Bienias, 2001, p. 55.
**Figure 13.** Nowy Korczyn in orthophotomap.

*Source: Photo: [in:] Geoportal*

**Figure 14-15.** Relics of traditional buildings in Nowy Korczyn nowadays. View of the fragment of the east market frontage

*Source: Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa 2015*

**Figure 16.** Church of St. Stanislaw the Bishop nowadays. View of the front elevation from the south-west. Figure 17. Church of the Holy Trinity and St. Lawrence and Elizabeth nowadays

*Source: Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa 2015*
Another town worth describing here is Sieniawa, located in the Podkarpacie region, in the Przeworsk district. Sieniawa was created in the second half of the 17th century. It was granted the town rights in 1676, in connection with the urbanization of the private estates belonging to the Sieniawski family. The undertaking involved transformation of the spatial structure of the existing village and its adaptation to meet the town needs.

The town, established at the turn of the 1670s and 1680s, became a completely new structure subordinate to a new functional programme which had been set down by Mikołaj Sieniawski for this part of his estates.6

Because of its centuries-long history the town boasts historic objects and complexes of exceptional architectonic and urban value. They include: the urban layout of the town with the market square and the town hall, the palace with its park and garden complex, the monastic complex of the Observant Dominicans, the building of the “Sokół” Gymnastic Association and the granary in Augustow. Some of those spaces and objects have been revalorised in recent years, and the town begins to regain its former glamour. The market square has been renovated, and the town hall regained its tower.

The former “Sokół” building, the monastic complex and the palace have also been revalorised. The granary in Augustow, which is currently a subject of particular care by the authorities because of its poor technical condition, is still waiting for renovation and adaptation. The discussed centre is a positive example of proper care taken by owners and users of historic objects about their state of preservation. The town authorities, besides their obligation as a user and owner of a historic object imposed on them by the Monument Care and Protection Act, draw the attention of the local community to the potential, traditions and history of the town, and persevere in restoring the most significant objects and public spaces in the town to their proper appearance and rank.

Figure 20. Sieniawa in orthophotomap

![Sieniawa orthophotomap](image)

**Source:** Photo [in:] Geoportal

Figure 21. Revalorised town hall in Sieniawa.

Figure 22. Revalorised monastic complex of the Observant Dominicans in Sieniawa.

![Town hall and monastic complex](images)

**Source:** Photo: D. Kuśnierz-Krupa 2015

Figure 23. Revalorised building of the former “Sokoł” in Sieniawa

![Revalorised building](image)
Summary
The above describe towns are examples of historic centres that are home to relics of historic buildings with precious architectonic detail. The majority of them can boast an eventful past which has often been forgotten by many, particularly the younger generation, or is completely unknown. All those elements contribute to the towns’ identity and the fact that they are unique, despite current social and economic problems. This in turn is connected with the return to the sense of their urbanity, to the roots the memory of which ought to be constantly instilled and nurtured among their inhabitants. This history and identity of the place are manifested through its cultural landscape and its elements which must be preserved and revalorised. Such protection is not simple since inhabitants do not always feel or understand the need for bringing out the values of their little homelands, even though they are evidence of a rich past and cultural potential. Hence the demand to local authorities for focusing on educating the community as far as history and cultural landscape are concerned. It may also be worthwhile to show the inhabitants the benefits resulting from revalorising their property and communal spaces. Such a benefit is e.g. the economic development associated with stimulating cultural tourism, and consequently new workplaces, growing wealth of the inhabitants and increased value of the revalorised areas.

References

Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2014, pp. 91-110.