Transformations in housing construction in rural areas of Poland’s Lublin region—Influence on the spatial settlement structure and landscape aesthetics

Jerzy Bański a,⁎, Monika Wesołowska b

a Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences, Twarda 51/55, 00-818 Warszawa, Poland
b Institute of Earth Sciences, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, al. Krasnicka 2cd, 20-718 Lublin, Poland

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ABSTRACT

The analysis presented here concerns the influence of housing construction on spatial systems and the physiognomy of rural settlements serving various economic functions. In addition, the study offers an assessment of the influence new construction is having on the living conditions experienced by country-dwellers and the appearance and aesthetics characterising rural settlements. Particular attention is paid to modern housing construction, which only began to flourish in Poland in the period of economic transformation. A basis for the work has been provided by detailed research (field surveys, questionnaires and interviews) carried out in 15 villages located in Lublin voivodeship, eastern Poland. Changes in the spatial structure of villages under the influence of the new building are presented by reference to three villages representative of the residential, tourist-recreational and agricultural functional types.

The post-1989 process of economic transformation has magnified spatial differences as regards the kind of new housing construction taking place in rural areas. The intensity at which new building is taking place is very much a function of the size of the adjacent urban centre and the area’s distance from it. Housing construction concentrates close to the main transport arteries, along which a belt of enhanced economic activity is to be found. Pressures from new investors is giving rise to a transformation of the natural environment, as well to the appearance of new conflicts between agriculture and housing. The development of new styles of building has led to changes in traditional configuration of villages.

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1. Introduction

The rural settlement process in successive periods was subject to a wide range of phenomena encouraging spatial differentiation. Changes involved both the settlement system as a whole over a certain larger area and the spatial structure of different settlement units. The result has been the generation of various different systems of rural settlement, as well as a diversity of morphogenetic settlement types. Residential buildings constitute a fundamental element here.

Rural settlement is a distribution of type and density depending on both natural and socioeconomic conditions. The natural conditions (most notably quality of land and its suitability for farming) are deemed to play the primary role where the onset of rural settlement is concerned (Sevenant and Antrop, 2007; Unvin and Nash, 1992). In contrast, it is the socioeconomic factors (inter alia major agricultural reforms and processes of migration) that shape the spatial structure of the settlement system in general, and individual villages in particular. Indeed, the role of the said social and economic factors became steadily greater in successive historical periods, just as the importance of the natural factors declined. This conclusion has gained support over time from the work of Von Thunen (1842), Chisholm (1967), Cloke (1979) and Kiełczewska-Zaleska (1978), among others. Today’s spatial structure to rural settlement is above all shaped by accessibility in terms of transport, and the density of the road network (Havbaker et al., 2004); location in relation to large urban agglomerations (Thorson, 1997; Hammer et al., 2004); outfitting in infrastructure (Bański, 2006); land prices (Ihlanfeldt, 2007); legal conditioning and so forth.

Agriculture represented the primary function of rural areas in the past, so it was characteristic for village construction to be dominated by farmstead buildings present at varying densities and in different spatial arrangements. However, as economic development progressed and rural areas became better equipped with social and technical infrastructure, economic functions other than farming developed. This went hand in hand with an intensifying process of urbanisation and ever-greater interest in the urban way of life, the overall result being a change in the way villages were being built-up that was noticeable in terms of both physiognomy and morphology.

The changes in question are most tangible in the satellite villages around the larger cities, and they have been following the same course irrespective of geographical location. The only differences are in dynamic and time of occurrence (Bański, 2005b;
3. Diagnose and discussion

3.1. A general outline of the development of housing construction in Polish rural areas

Post-War Poland witnessed more than a doubling in its housing resources. The number of dwellings in cities increased by more than 200%, while the number in rural areas rose by just 60%. However, while the number of town- and city-dwellers grew dramatically, the population of rural areas remained more or less stable. Furthermore, it was towns and cities that suffered most during World War II, so these were in far greater need of far-reaching reconstruction work.

State policy had a marked influence on the way new construction developed. The centrally planned economy was just that, the central authorities deciding on the allocation of funding for housing construction, the aim being to ensure comparability of living conditions across the country. The standards imposed from above harmonised the kind of residential building work that was being done nationwide. Nevertheless, the principle was more fully adhered to in urban than rural areas. Towns and cities were dominated by a model in which housing estates comprised many blocks of flats, each block bringing together many families in a single building. Nevertheless, the buildings in villages also had an appearance dictated at least partly by the standards set.

Once the War was over, the Polish authorities faced the tough task of configuring the settlement network of a territorially new country, as well as making good the severe losses in housing stock that had taken place. These tasks formed part of farm reform, as well as coming under the National Physical Planning Act 1946. Unfortunately, implementation in practice did not achieve the desired regulation of the settlement system. Rather, it encouraged a previous trend towards the over-dispersal or sprawling of built-up areas, as well as allowing new developments to take place with no heed being paid to environmental protection principles. It was only with the 1961 Act designating building land in rural areas that planning principles were put in order and built-up areas became less likely to sprawl out excessively.

The maximum growth in rural housing resources occurred in the 1950s, the activity reflecting the reconstruction of residential buildings destroyed between 1939 and 1945 (Table 1). It is estimated that some 35% of all residential buildings in Poland were lost during the War. The later decades did not bring such spectacular quantitative changes in the housing stock, though there were more marked qualitative changes, mainly entailing the replacement of old buildings with new ones, as well as the employment of better-quality, more-modern building materials. The architectural styles and appearances of buildings also obviously changed.
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