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NEGLECTED LANDSCAPES: ON THE AESTHETICS OF THE POLISH URBAN SCENERY

ZANIEDBANE KRAJOBRAZY: O ESTETYCE POLSKIEJ PRZESTRZENI ZURBANIZOWANEJ

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ABSTRACT: The article offers a reflection on the possible causes of a disregarding attitude to the value of landscape and spatial order in contemporary Poland. Neglecting aesthetic values, usually interpreted as an effect of the communist past, is considered in the paper as a symptom of a specific spatial culture correlated with the social and cultural grounds of the present Polish society. Although it is possible to point out several viable determinants of the present landscape quality in Poland, they all seem to have the same origin. To feature it, the author refers to P. Bourdieu's *habitus* concept as well as to the socio-historical perspective in which the Polish society was shaped (peasant culture). The problem of the lack of adequate aesthetic education also stems from the same cultural context. The enhancement of pro-landscape thinking requires resolute actions in many fields. Nonetheless, a proper understanding of the aesthetic education seems to be crucial here.

KEY WORDS: landscape aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, spatial order; aesthetic education, Polish cultural landscape, standard of taste, *habitus*, peasant culture

ABSTRAKT: Artykuł poświęcony jest możliwym przyczynom lekceważącego stosunku do krajobrazu i ładu przestrzennego we współczesnej Polsce. Zaniedbywanie wartości estetycznych, zwykle interpretowane jako pokłosie komunistycznej przeszłości, pojmowane jest tu jako przejaw specyficznej kultury przestrzennej, ukształtowanej w lokalnym kontekście kulturowym. Celem pracy jest zwrócenie uwagi na to, że wiele bezpośrednich uwarunkowań estetycznej kondycji polskiego krajobrazu wyrasta ze wspólnego socjo-kulturowego podłoża. Do jego rekonstrukcji i opisu wykorzystano koncepcję habitusu P. Bourdieu oraz perspektywę historyczną (kultura chłopska), w której kształtowało się polskie społeczeństwo. Wzmocnienie myślenia pro-krajobrazowego wymaga zdecydowanych działań w wielu dziedzinach, jednak właściwie rozumiana edukacja estetyczna (o której mowa w końcowej części artykułu) jest tutaj kwestią kluczową.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: estetyka krajobrazu, estetyka środowiskowa, ład przestrzenny, edukacja estetyczna, polski krajobraz kulturowy, *habitus*, kultura chłopska

Even a quick glance at the Polish landscape by someone familiarised with the issues of spatial order and aesthetics leads to unflattering conclusions: the urban space quality

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reveals a common lack of pro-landscape thinking and care for everyday aesthetics. Not only is haphazard architecture not corresponding to the character of surroundings, but it displays a dramatic lack of respect for local building tradition – messy homesteads, kitsch colours of overlays, the multitude of advertising banners veiling urban and roadside panoramas – this is what the Polish landscape looks like (Figures 1, 2).

The preservation of landscape and care for spatial order are severe weaknesses of the state policy in Poland. Polish access to the European Union (2004) has not changed the situation – local authorities are still not obliged to draw up the right planning strategy. It also seems that the so-called ‘landscape act’ promoted once by the former President of Poland, Bronisław Komorowski, has been to no effect in terms of aesthetics of environment because it was adopted by the parliament merely partially and with some significant changes to that (the latter, in some critics’ opinion, were made due to advertising and wind farm lobbies). Neglecting landscape aesthetic values may be reasonably interpreted as a symptom of ‘expansive development’ thinking still dominating in Poland. However, paradoxically, the term ‘sustainable development’ is enjoying an enormous popularity in Poland. The idea of development, when misunderstood, brings deplorable effects, especially in small urban settings where it causes radical changes in the local scenery, a loss of *genius loci* as well as a loss of small-town identity (Bryl-Roman 2011, 2014).

Where does this state of affairs stem from? Why does the Polish landscape look so unsightly? For what reasons do the Polish people disregard landscape? To some, answers



Fig. 1. Polish urban landscape, a photograph by Łukasz Kniter, from the series *Sacrum* (2015)



Fig. 2. Polish urban landscape, a photograph by Łukasz Kniter (2015). The photographer for several years has been documenting the Polish urban landscape on the blog: <http://enclosed-space.blogspot.com>

spring to mind automatically – both in colloquial and formal discussions one of the most common reasons is the legacy of many arduous years of communism (Praweńska-Skrzypek and Pawłowska 1996; Stefanowki 2004; Sroczyński 2006). However, this approach does not provide a full answer. Polish spatial chaos experts claim that it is the aftermath of both historical conditions: unequal development in the partitioned territories, military occupation during World War I and World War II, centrally planned economy in the period of the Polish People's Republic, as well as contemporary conditions: modernisation and post-modernisation, psychological and social causes, legal and planning reasons (Śleszyński and Markowski and Kowalewski 2018).

Researchers of the Polish landscape aesthetics and spatial order foundations devote relatively little space to psychological and awareness determinants. Deeper causes of important, after all, factors of local spatial culture, such as low social recognition and insufficient education, are rarely sought. The authors of *Studies on spatial chaos* note that a factor inhibiting the high valorisation of the environment in Polish society is also the attitude to property law, according to which it is a superior good, above

the group or public interest (Śleszyński and Markowski and Kowalewski 2018). As the theory of urban planning and spatial development lacks a coherent concept that would satisfactorily explain the relationship between the state of satisfying needs and spatial order, attempts have been made to describe this issue by implementing Maslow's concept of hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1954) in spatial development processes (Śleszyński 2011, 2015; Śleszyński and Markowski and Kowalewski 2018). As a result, it is stated that:

[...] aesthetic values at the very top of the pyramid of needs will only be taken into account when other lower-level needs are met. The proposed concept therefore explains why low-level societies do not attach too much importance to the appearance of the surroundings and the landscape: they are preoccupied with more pressing existential needs (Śleszyński and Markowski and Kowalewski 2018).

Nevertheless, just as wealth does not always go hand in hand with sophisticated aesthetics, so poverty is not necessarily associated with ugliness. For example, Finland's aesthetic culture, now admired and appreciated around the world, has grown up on the basis of a very modest society and a resource-poor country (Lewińska 1989). Therefore, one should look for another way to explain the disrespectful attitude to the aesthetics of the environment in Poland.

In this article I am trying to reconstruct the foundations of Polish 'spatial taste' by focusing on the historically conditioned socio-cultural context, as well as expound possible remedial actions aimed at improving the quality of the local landscape. This theoretical and analytical approach presents methodological pluralism specific to cultural studies. The analysed material combines various fields and research orientations: primarily history (cultural history), sociology of culture and urban cultural studies.

The starting point for further considerations will be the landscape and its semantic and informative potential. It is worth highlighting a few initial assumptions. The first one is the communicative function of landscape, the second one – its close relation to a particular culture, and – last but not least – the influence of social structure, in particular socio-cultural standards of taste, on landscape shape.

Semantics of the cultural landscape

Urban landscape – the product of human activity, the working material of architects and city planners – stimulates various senses; but, first of all, it forms an iconosphere, man's visual environment that can be considered a medium. As any other image, it refers to something more than itself, which makes it a kind of sign. From this perspective, works of architecture and city planning (and the urban space created by them) are messages (texts, codes). Their content may affect not only the inhabitants' sentiments and moods, but also their ethical and aesthetic values and views, which are also reflected in their social behaviour (Jałowicki and Szczepański 2006). The communicative dimension of urban space is most often addressed by interdisciplinary research related to city planning, cultural geography, urban semiotics or urban cultural studies. The

latter emphasises the necessity to read urban space from the perspective of hybrid and variable cultural patterns (Michałowska 2014).

There are five basic trends that can be distinguished in modern landscape research: aesthetic, perceptive, ideological, mnemonic and performative; however, there are no fixed divisions between them – their reflections freely ‘flow’ between and support each other (Rybicka 2015). The politicised reading of landscape contributed to the popularisation of critical revisions of the concept of ‘landscape’ in various disciplines analysing urban experience (Dziuban 2014). The main orientations in this type of analyses are two: the first one refers to ‘lived landscapes’ and the ‘relative’ understanding of landscape, experiencing space by its users who attribute meanings to their physical and cultural environment; the other one is the perspective of ‘representational landscapes’ that addresses landscape as material space, a product of human labour and a ‘correlate’ of a particular culture (Dziuban 2014).

From the perspective of representational landscapes, typical of cultural geography and Marxist theories of space, images are cultural products, expressions of power and social status:

Cultural landscapes – urban developments, architectural and city structures and their literary and visual representations – are products of complex political, social and cultural processes managed and imposed by those who have the power to shape and stabilise the meaning of social reality and to determine the form and meaning of cultural space (Dziuban, 2014: 163-164).

Landscape is treated here as the ‘symbolic, hegemonic production’, while the power creating it is the power “to define and stabilise the dynamics of spatial and social relations” (Dziuban 2014: 164). By contrast, ‘lived landscape’ is a concept based on the bond of inhabitants with their environment. In the research utilising such an understanding of landscape, one adopts the perspective of ‘insiders’ – their daily experiences and notions and their grass-roots, ‘vernacular’ space constructs (Dziuban 2014: 165). According to this orientation, landscapes are “humanised spaces, filled with social meaning and directly related to, regulated and created by human actions and motivations” (Dziuban 2014: 165).

As recommended by W.J.T. Mitchell, the above-mentioned orientations should be combined with each other (Dziuban 2014: 168; Mitchell 2004: 5). An effective fusion of the two perspectives can be achieved by viewing landscape from the angle of taste, the attribute of ‘spatial culture’ of a particular society that determines the methods of shaping its environment. Determinations related to the role of taste in social structure can be found in sociological theories, which will be discussed in the following section.

Standards of taste and *habitus*

In his study *On the Process of Civilisation*, which was first published in 1939, the German sociologist Norbert Elias wrote that in any social configuration there were layers building their position in the structure by promoting their own model of good

manners. For example, in Europe – following the decline of the Roman Empire – it was the knighthood, followed by court aristocracy and finally the bourgeoisie (Bucholc 2012). The standards promoted by them can be called, after Hume, standards of taste. Marta Bucholc, an expert on Elias, noted:

Taste strengthens the rule. Good taste is simply the taste of a group including its specific position in the social system. Taste cannot be codified, inferred or bought. There is no other way to find out what good taste is than observe the way of life of those who are gifted with it. Any established and mindlessly reproduced collective way of life, determined by social situation, is based on the mere elusive feeling that certain things are unacceptable (Bucholc 2012).

Elias called such a way of life ‘*habitus*’. However, this concept was only later popularised by the ‘guru of French sociology’ – Pierre Bourdieu (Bucholc 2012).

Societies examined by Elias or Bourdieu were characterised by a relatively stable structure in which the level of cultural capital usually went hand in hand with the position determined by the social class (Bucholc 2012). Some investigators, however, point out that such a vision is not sufficient to explain the phenomena occurring in modern societies, where social class is losing the status of the main category of social differentiation that determines individual fates (Szacka 2003; Bucholc 2012). Admittedly, as noted by Barbara Szacka, the social panorama of today’s postmodern societies could be depicted as:

[...] an elaborate mosaic of subcultures of taste, informal communities, unions of civic initiatives, rebellious ethnic and religious groups, generation cohorts, enclaves of alternative lifestyles, internet discussion groups, professional associations etc. Many of these communities are ephemeral, other ones last a long time. They unite people of different economic positions and political affiliations and prompt to undertake common actions. For all these reasons, the relation between the socio-economic position of the individual and his or her lifestyle, identity, consumer and political behaviour are vanishing (Szacka 2003: 307).

It appears, however, that despite the growing importance of “non-class” determinants that differentiate societies, Bourdieu’s concept, differing from Marxist or earlier sociological approaches, has not ceased to apply. The main reason for it, as noted by Anna Matuchniak-Krasuska, is that for the French sociologist “social classes are theoretical constructs, potentials, not real social entities as Marx put it,” and that “constant processes of distinction or differentiation from other social classes take place within each social class, followed by the construction and reproduction of structures typical of a particular class” (Matuchniak-Krasuska 2015).

We may assume that social classes can be defined as the modern “subcultures of taste” (Bourdieu 2005), or as the “tribes” (Maffesoli 2008). They are made of “groups of people who have similar positions in the social space, share similar worldviews, similar practices, as well as similar dispositions, in other words – a common *habitus*” (Matuchniak-Krasuska 2015). It is not the possession or non-possession of means of production by an individual, but the total of social characteristics that determine his or her position in society along with its place in the structure of superiority/inferiority at the same time (Matuchniak-Krasuska 2015).

According to Bourdieu's taste – the product of a particular social structure and the context created by it – is the most elusive and the most deeply rooted element of *habitus* (Bucholc 2012). The knowledge of the rules of taste, acquired during the participation in social life, along with other cultural competences, constitute the so-called cultural capital. It is precisely the cultural competences that define the way people perceive and shape their own environment.

The background of Polish scenery condition is frequently associated with the post-war order. Such opinions dominate in journalism. Many would agree with Michał Stefanowski, for whom it was the war and the communist 'conversion' that led to a "cultural tangle, disruption of continuity and lack of models" (Stefanowski, 2004). He also claims that showing no care for even the nearest vicinity (like a staircase) is the symptom of sovietisation, which deprived Polish people of "the sense of property, place identity and the sensibility to the space they live in" (Stefanowski 2004: 16). Still, if we are talking about landscape condition, we must highlight that it was mainly after the 1989 breakthrough, under new circumstances, when Polish space was radically spoiled; along with the free market, a motley of advertisements, cheap booths, ugly store windows and signboards – all this 'furnishings' of private enterprises spread in the Polish landscape (Bryl-Roman 2011: 238).

In the new political system, the standards of communist Poland planning were dropped, giving way to chaotic urbanism and the so-called 'anything goes' architecture. Formal and legal resolutions appear to be eminently inefficient, making the situation even worse than in the socialist era (Kusiak 2017; Niedziałkowski 2017; Kowalewski and Nowak 2018; Śleszyński and Markowski and Kowalewski 2018). Although in the 1990s local governments were granted more power in the decision and planning process, they have not been able to use it properly – more often than not refusing to enact complex plans, as the latter could enhance the elasticity in treating potential investors. Many of new investments have been of profiteering nature only. Additionally, a lot of designers and architects have contributed to these dealings, wasting their abilities and sacrificing professional ethos for profits. It is not uncommon for developers or procurers not to follow the original designs, which results in a huge discrepancy between the project realisations and their former visualisations. For the needs of housing policy implementation, many changes have been made to the legal regulations. In 2018, the act on facilitating the preparation and implementation of housing and accompanying investments was adopted, which – according to the Ministry of Investment and Development – will reduce legal barriers limiting housing development with a particular emphasis on planning barriers. Commonly known as *lex developer*, it allows the efficient implementation of residential development in post-industrial, post-military and agricultural areas located within the city limits. Experts alert, however, that it may adversely affect spatial order. The mixing of procedures and competences will disorganize the legal system. In addition, new buildings, located outside compact areas, may interfere with previously introduced restrictions limiting its dispersion (Małuj 2019). Nevertheless, the legislative order is not the only factor determining the landscape quality.

It is thought-provoking why only now, thirty years after the collapse of the previous political system, despite having the possibilities to travel around the world, an access to the models of harmonious environment shaping, the condition of the Polish landscape has not improved. Undoubtedly, at least in some countries of the former Eastern Bloc (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia) the respect for landscape values varies. Therefore, attributing the current state of affairs in Poland primarily to the socialist system and communism may appear exaggerated.

Before considering the possible deeper causes of the current state of affairs, it is worth taking a look at the issue that may have more direct impact on the Polish landscape condition: the aesthetic education.

Education and landscape awareness

There are many proponents of intelligent planning and landscape prevention in Poland. Their ideas, however, have a limited occupational impact. Works of distinguished aestheticians and educationists (e.g. Szuman 1969; Suchodolski 1968; Wojnar 1984 or Golaszewska 1989), are getting dusty on libraries' shelves, rarely bearing fruit in the implementation of teaching programmes. Undoubtedly, an important educational potential brings the idea of landscape perceived as a common good. It permeates especially in the urban design theory and its recognition of public space. The latter does not only constitute the free-access areas – streets, squares or city's green zones, which are an open urban infrastructure, but also all the elements that are visible to a passer-by, like buildings' elevations, house fences and front gardens. Unfortunately there is no room for such contents in teaching programmes. The aesthetic education focused on taking care of the human environment practically is hard to come by Polish schools. Children are rarely taught about it during art classes, which are too few (see Figure 3) and are often conducted by underqualified teachers (as the specific knowledge is difficult to gain during preparatory courses).

It is hard to disagree with Filip Springer who deplores the low level of aesthetic education in schools and considers it the very reason for the little interest in landscape and the lack of responsibility for the unsightly appearance of the environment. The before-mentioned issue is exemplified by the results of public opinion polls he quoted below:

In 2008, CBOS (Centre for Public Opinion Research) asked Poles the question: who is responsible for the aesthetics of the environment? More than forty-seven percent of the respondents replied that it was the responsibility of local authorities of individual towns or cities, nearly twenty-four percent believed it was the task of architects and city planners, while only twelve percent attributed this responsibility to house owners and members of housing associations. Among other replies, "a special ministry appointed for that purpose" (almost six percent) and "the government and the Prime Minister" (more than one and a half percent) are rather striking. In the same poll, the pollsters asked who – according to the respondents – was responsible for the quality of architecture. According to thirty-five percent of the Poles it was the local authorities, while one third believed it was architects and city planners. Only slightly over seven percent indicated that the owners of buildings were responsible for the quality of their architecture. Moreover, sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated that low maintenance cost was the most important factor

when choosing a house. To forty-five percent it was a safe neighbourhood. The outer appearance of the building was the most important factor for sixteen percent of the respondents, and the integration of the house with the surrounding buildings was considered an important factor by every fiftieth respondent (CBOS 2010; Springer 2013 a).

The results of the survey clearly show how indifferent the Polish are to the space they live in. As Springer remarks, Polish schools do not teach what harmony is, neither how to evaluate the proportions of a building or what the colour wheel is about. The problem of environmental aesthetics is most often reduced to the preparation of school display cases and occasional decorations. Pupils are not taught to perceive and appreciate landscape quality. The omission of such contents in the educational process only enhances the Poles' feeling that they are not responsible for common space, as they do not know much about it (Springer 2013 a).



Fig. 3. Artistic Education for Children in Europe. Based on the report *Arts and Cultural Education at School in Europe*, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009), elaborated by F. Springer (Springer 2013 b: 243).

It seems that the lack of proper aesthetic values may be linked to a wider question of authorities' and the teachers' ethos crisis, along with the growth of consumerist lifestyle and its special individualism (or egoism, as a matter of fact). In such conditions it is expected from the state to take adequate measures to set up a coherent strategy. Changing this situation, however, would require long-term plans, which is not a great strength of the Polish *habitus*.

Katarzyna Prawelska-Skrzypek and Krystyna Pawłowska remark that contrary to many other media, the landscape is permanently informative and therefore it may be an excellent means of promotion but also an effective means of great shame (Prawelska-Skrzypek and Pawłowska 1996: 18). It is difficult, however, to put a Polish person to shame because of landscape disrespecting. One of the press report's protagonists, the owner of a plot in Podhale region, which he made messy by arranging there a tire-made racetrack for quads, asked how he liked the view from his window now, answered:

“I don’t have time to look through the window” (Sroczyński 2010). It seems that in Poland, perceiving a landscape is an ability which is disappearing. Probably this is the reason why the resourceful Poles, paradoxically, do not take into account the economic value of landscape.

It is not difficult to get the impression that with the deterioration of harmonious landscapes in Poland, the resources of competent observers, able to perceive the changes taking place in the landscape as negative and disturbing, also shrink. The apologists of planning order, calling for struggle against ‘urban illiteracy (*analphabeticism*)’ and ‘spatial luridness’ (terms drawn from Adamczewska-Wejher and Wejher 1986) know that besides the inevitable legal changes, there remains a serious problem of Polish spatial culture (labelled also as a culture of space) (Królikowski and Rylke 2010: 173). In the further part of this article, I will try to sketch the determinants of this phenomenon.

The origins of Polish spatial culture

According to Bourdieu, “the eye is the product of history reproduced by education” (Bourdieu 2005: 11). A similar opinion was expressed by Witold Krassowski, a Polish master of the photo essay genre, though he uses the word “culture” as the determinant of a ‘tasteful’ perception (both personal and social culture): “seeing the landscape as a whole and not just its single elements, illustrates propriety and culture” (Krassowski in: Królikowski and Rylke 2010: 166). From the cultural studies perspective a landscape is a correlate of a specific spatial culture.

Polish spatial culture has developed from the peasant culture – an earlier and more deeply rooted social and historical context than the communist Poland. The position of Polish peasants has always been difficult; for centuries they were exploited in the serfdom system abolished by the invaders at the end of nineteenth century. Poland was a rural state between the First and the Second World War. Shortly before the Second World War the rural population made up almost 60 percent of the society. According to Jacek Wasilewski, in Poland of that time:

[...] only a few cities had a large-city characteristic in the European sense: Warsaw, Lvov, Cracow, Poznan. The major part of society qualified as townspeople lived in small towns of about 5 thousands inhabitants, which did not significantly varied from villages. Looking at old photos of such towns it is easy to recognise that only the main streets were cobbled and an urban infrastructure was missing (Wasilewski 2012: 15).

Włodzimierz Mędrzecki remarks that the majority of young state citizens belonged to the truly traditional world; its rhythm and living level were measured by “a small, traditionally managed peasant homestead, a tiny workshop and a weekly fair in a town, where the abilities of reading and writing were rather a symptom of higher aspirations than of everyday needs” (Mędrzecki 2008).

Although the memory of old injustices easily revived and despite multiple conflicts between the peasants and the government, Polish countryside was changing. Thanks to the efforts of intelligentsia, building the new state’s ideological foundation, the

peasants' conservatism was losing its strength. The social prestige was in the hands of landed classes, thought of as 'the custodians of the nobility culture great tradition,' who indicated 'alive models of social attitude, elegance, customs and good taste':

The Polish landed classes, in which the descendants of huge aristocratic and noble families were instrumental, supported democratic model of the revived Polish country and even voluntarily accepted agricultural reform which in fact threatened their interests (Mędrzecki 2008).

Each social class – says Bourdieu – has its unique *habitus*, separate from other classes and characterised by a specific kind of taste. Lower classes aspire to the *habitus* (and taste) of the dominant class that is imposed on them by the so-called symbolic violence. As Marta Bucholc writes:

We mindlessly apply our propriety standards that we have acquired by hearing countless times "this is not the way to do it" and modelled by imitation. Habit creates habitus. When one attempts to change one's habitus, it is the taste that most effectively resists such interference. It is the most permanent indicator of social position and ruthlessly betrays imitators, sparing only the true virtuosos of mimicry (Bucholc 2012).

In Poland, for a long time the gentry used to be such a class, which played a double role – of dictators of taste and guardians of aesthetic standards. The standards' keepers soon disappeared. During the Second World War Poland lost three social classes almost completely: landed class, bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie. New authorities discredited the remnants of former social prestige custodians, stigmatizing them as the nation's enemies. Instead, the peasants (of whom there were relatively fewer fatalities) became – as Jacek Wasilewski remarks – the social supply base of a new system, which created possibilities of advance for them, facilitating the access to education and employment (Wasilewski 2012: 15).

Although labelling contemporary Poland a peasant country is unjustified, the present-day Polish mentality still keeps the heritage of peasant culture. According to Wasilewski, its results are such features of Polish society as distrust, isolationism, inability to take citizen's attitude and consumerism:

In western societies the consumerist attitude is an effect of capitalism. In Poland instead, with no middle class and market-based economy, it is a consequence of peasants' poverty. The material things used to be and still are real values here. The insecurity of existence and the generational experiences imposed the strategy of goods accumulation, which in many situations was a guarantee of survival. Therefore, there arose the enormous value attributed to the land possessed and the eternal proverbial 'border struggles'. The characteristic attitude of the rural societies was: to have, not to be. It has become quite common nowadays, as it stems from the peasants' poverty. The affection to 'having' was strengthened by capitalism and today everybody wants to 'have' (Wasilewski 2012: 16).

Also, the problem with treating the landscape as a universal value and the specific taste may then have the same or related origins. The consumer's drive based on the peasant *habitus* undermines the aesthetic sensitivity to the environment and wreaks havoc on the native landscape, while at the same time it strengthens the belief of the average Pole that space has to generate profits and serve mainly mercantile purposes. The question of the so-called good taste is rarely applied in the local *habitus* to some-

thing other than objects and phenomena that serve as evidence of a high material status. Good taste – being an attribute of an educated elite with its sublime senses, free from prejudices and accustomed to experiencing many kinds of beauty (Hume 1955), also defined as ‘pure’ taste (Bourdieu 2005: 43), characterising groups with a high cultural capital – appears in the modern Polish culture only in a vestigial form, suppressed by the expansive, culturally reproductive common taste. Replacing the traditional architecture of small towns and villages with city style buildings or the common sight – not only in the Polish provinces – of houses in the manor style are examples of inept mimicry that is in fact a caricature of the lifestyle and taste of wealthy city elites or the former elites of the gentry.

Today, political correctness commands silence on issues of good taste, and the few defenders of harmonious landscape development (similar to environmentalists) are exposed to attacks by defenders of private property and the free market. For the former ones, however, the problem of degradation of the Polish landscape is serious and requires an intervention.

One may ask the question: How should the spatial culture in Poland be shaped? Where should one look for an antidote to the models imprinted on the Polish in their early childhood? How should one develop in the Polish society the ability to perceive the landscape, the need to protect it and to design public space in a conscious and pro-landscape manner?

Prospects for a change

Changing this status quo would undoubtedly require widespread actions in many fields: law, spatial politics and education. The latter is a challenge to *in actu* aesthetics, the action aesthetics, especially the aesthetic education. The number of classes on the aesthetic culture (e.g. art classes) should be increased; the content of these requires changes and teachers should be better prepared to deliver such subjects. Responsible aesthetic education ought to promote the idea of sustainable development and create a proper approach to the active citizenship. But aesthetic education ought not to be limited only to lessons and classes run in schools.

The state should enable people to be surrounded by a well composed space – schools, hospitals and all public agencies should function as models of such designed places; what is important, it should be a common praxis to organise architectonic contests for public space arrangement in cities and towns as this would improve the Polish scenery (Bryl-Roman 2011).

The authors of *Społeczno-kulturowe sposoby gospodarowania przestrzenią* [Social and Cultural Methods of Space Management], who express their fears about the future of both the native landscape and the generations brought up in it, remind us: “a human being expresses himself by shaping the environment, and the environment reciprocally shapes our personalities” (Królikowski and Rylke 2010: 147). The practices of developing space, characteristic of a particular *habitus*, are preserved and reproduced. In that

way they become standards, models. This feature of cultural landscape is examined in the performative orientation, in which the landscape is not only an object of human interference, but first of all it itself becomes a driving force affecting human actions, views and values, including the aesthetic ones. A landscape shaped by “an inept eye and bad taste” – as Clement Greenberg (2006), who detests political correctness would probably refer to it – creates no conditions for reproducing models of perceiving the beauty of the environment and for developing “tasteful” landscapes.

Assuming that the spatial order is an explanation of the cultural one, it is difficult to face the future fearlessly. All the more as the problems deriving from class “peculiarities” overlap with the new ones, caused by economic and political divisions, as well as by the development of communication technologies and their consequences for lifestyles, building relationships with others and for identity construction processes.

Cultural landscapes seem to be influenced by ‘network’ lifestyles and the global economy. For the inhabitants of the virtual megalopolis the real space and the native landscape supposedly do not bear great importance. Therefore, the aesthetic values of cultural landscape are endangered, in particular in such countries as Poland, where they do not enjoy the status of principles and as such lack effective legal protection.

Conclusion: Why does Polish urban scenery look so unsightly?

Undoubtedly it would be unfair to put the blame on communism only, although to some degree it taught people not to respect common goods and move them to abreact the communist greyness. In order to forget it people went into another extreme of exuberant expressions. Historical factors are important, but they are strongly associated with socio-cultural conditions that determine the nature of legal and planning solutions, which have a direct impact on the shape of the space that surrounds us. In this article, I have tried to look at the historically conditioned socio-cultural background of Polish urban landscape. One of the deeply rooted reasons of its quality, as it has already been pointed out, can be the impact of peasants’ culture and its history on the national *habitus* and taste. It is specific cultural competences that determine what is worth being under legal protection, and what is not. The legal order of a particular society results from its *habitus*. That is why it can be concluded that Poland is ugly, because it is allowed to be ugly. There are no suitable legal regulations or tools for their enforcement. Penalties for destroying landscape are infrequent, and fines are too low to prevent others from committing this type of offence (which results, among other things, in the chronic illegal placement of advertisements).

The commonness of ugliness also stems from the fact that Poles who deal with it every day have become desensitised to it, which can also be seen as a consequence of the constant reproduction of models included in the *habitus*. The inclination to exploit and destroy the environment and to treat space as a commodity with little regard for the consequences is a symptom of the consumerism based on the peasant *habitus*. The same applies to the decline in the professional ethos of architects and city planners,

which is exceptionally destructive for Polish landscapes. More often than not, they are forced to work according to their clients' tastes and moral standards.

The taste of educated people aspiring to the middle class (in Poland, the middle class is only just emerging) does not reflect the taste of the majority of society. The poor care for basic needs and landscape is not one of them. However, this could be justified if the ugly was inseparable from poverty, but it is not the case. Neither does the taste of the rich result in creating a 'tasteful', harmonious space. Therefore, it appears that the direct determinants of the Polish spatial culture constitute 'dysfunctional perception' and 'lack' of aesthetic sensitivity in the meaning of the minority of elite critics of taste. They argue that Poland is so hideous, because Poles do not perceive their environment or perceive it "with a faulty eye". However, it is only a problem of the aforementioned elite, because – as polls indicate – 82% of the Polish society like the space they inhabit (CBOS 2010: 6).

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