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ID 1652 | VILLAGE CHARACTER – TO THE ROOTS OF RURAL AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT: Quality of public spaces is one of the crucial themes of contemporary architecture and urban design also because its significance is evident not only to the architects. Even in the era of strong individualism, public spaces pertain to the whole of a community and jointly form its identity. Therefore, it is reasonable to pay attention to their aesthetic nature on a general level. This paper aims to provide an intelligible ground for a creative grasping of the rural character of environment based on two criteria: 1) the relationship of figure and ground, 2) the level of urban character. These criteria apply both to remote territories as well as to fragments of former villages engulfed in metropolitan areas. It is based on the interpretation of selected features of rural environment which are generally considered valuable by architects.

1 INTRODUCTION: APPROACHING THE CHARACTER

An aspect of a village green or a village lane differs from that of an urban square and streets. Or does it? Viewed from distance, many differences between urban and rural environment seem rather obvious; however, the closer we focus on individual features the more difficult it is to determine where the threshold lies or even if there is any at all. Moreover, many features which used to be considered as intrinsic manifestation of ruralness seem to be fading or are being turned into projections of romantic sentiments. Today it is often emphasised that we are living in an urban age or that the concepts of landscape or countryside descend directly from urbanisation. No wonder one has plenty reasons to doubt whether it is legitimate to ponder upon any innate features of rural environment at all.

My argument is that such aim is not only possible but also an important one. In this paper, I shall focus on the space-in-between the houses of rural settlements, or in different words, on the physical facet of public space – the background on which the life of communities happens. My approach will be one of an architect-urbanist, of a profession especially trained in interpretation of material environment in various scales. The countryside will be viewed from a vantage point of central Europe; however the upshots could be applicable in other contexts as well.

2 LIMITS OF CONCEPTUALISATIONS

2.1 THE RURAL IN SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

From an academic point of view, the topic of the rural is currently most covered by disciplines akin to sociology and geography; their interest in description and mapping of the rural environment dates back to the end of 19th century. Even if it was just because of the vast amount of research which they have introduced since, it is only appropriate that I should start this article by regarding them.

These fields are characteristic by their focus on the space-society relation. Their descriptive approach to it was significantly influenced by a post-structuralist way of thinking especially in the 1980s which replaced the originally more deterministic understanding of the relation. This shift is best apparent in the growth of interest in understanding the rural space as an individual locality or as a product of various social representations (Halfacree 1993).

Especially the later approach is popular as being very efficient for investigating the rural by its attention to situated specificity through (disembodied) cognitive structures. In comparison to investigation of space through descriptive optics, such research of rural representations enables us to better appreciate the dynamism of space and focus on patterns of rural discourses. However, conceptualisation of rural representation – or as Paul Cloke (2006) puts it – the detaching of sign and signification (the rural and its meanings) from their referent (rural geographical space) not only enabled to investigate the blurred boundaries between city and country (not as opposites anymore) but it also led to further split between society–space approaches to the topic. This is well apparent in the proposition of Michael Bell (2007) to distinguish two dominant epistemologies of rural: the first rural as a mater-real category and the second rural as an idea-real category.

To avoid a deepening alienation, in which the rural could be understood in two extreme positions – on one side as an arbitrary analytic distinction (Copp 1972) or as a discursive linguistic interpretation (Murdoch and Pratt 1993) – Keith Halfacree (2006) introduced a three-fold-architecture which bounds the locality and social representation in one model. Since it has been adopted both in English-speaking countries (Woods 2011, p. 9-11) and on the continent (Hruška 2014, p. 50), it seems to be acceptable as a universal framework fitted for the current era of (post-)productivism. The model inspired by Lefebvrian ‘conceptual triad’ of understanding of spatiality consists of three facets: rural localities, formal representation of rural and everyday lives of rural, all three of them comprise the rural space (Halfacree 2006), however, as its author admits, it “is less about establishing a new understanding than about realizing what we already have” (p. 51).

The concept of space as a product could be approached from a wide scope of different rural discourses. An interesting research which dealt with visual representation of Czech villages in the national competition Village of the Year (Pospěch 2015) was situated in political and expert discourse. Through complex comparison of pictures selected by the local authorities of individual villages, it investigated an image of a good village. A part of the outcome is however very interesting for our topic situated in discourse of urban design. It is the finding that representation of the social facet strikingly dominates the material one – especially when compared to analysis of rural iconography of 1970s – 1990s (p. 81-83).

This outcome is particularly interesting when compared with the outcomes of my own research, in which I closely interviewed over 40 mayors of villages of the year 2013-2015. My presumption was that for most of the representatives of communities that actually placed in the prestigious competition, the question of tangible rural character of a village would be an actual topic. Surprisingly, although my aim was primarily to uncover their views of the physical features, it became clear that it usually wasn’t perceived by mayors as a spatial facet but rather as a social one.

A preliminary conclusion which could be outlined from these two examples and some others is that the rural character of material environment is perceived vaguely, rather as a background from which social activities or selected physical representations of their discourses stand out. My task then would be to ascertain whether there is some common ruralness present in the background. The three-fold-architecture model unfortunately doesn’t provide much help in this manner. Firstly, it is hardly possible to use it when exploring meanings which possibly lie beyond the common awareness. Secondly, given the bottomless amount of rural discourses, the result wouldn’t lead to the rural, but rather to “many rurals” (Murdoch and

Pratt, 1993: 425). If this paper should provide a useful tool, it has to restrict itself to interpretation of one material environment through its relation to other material environments.

2.2 AGRICULTURE AND RURAL CHARACTER

The concepts of rural environment (or simply countryside) and agriculture are so intertwined that it is virtually impossible to regard one without the other. Although the concept of countryside represents a spatial category and agriculture a process category, they have been often and by many discourses understood almost as synonyms. It is no wonder that even today, such understanding is very popular: most of the environment as we see it today is a result of hundreds of years of husbandry, and the current medial image of the countryside still supports this image for its comprehensibility. Yet it's obvious that "traditional" understanding of the countryside (as agriculture) in opposition to the Cities (as markets) – in spite its popularity – doesn't seem to provide a useful guide for current rural character any more. The main reason is the shift in scale, technology and economy of agriculture which led to the situation when the bindings between agriculture and form of rural settlements become rather arbitrary or at least indifferent.

My intention not to ponder on the relation between agriculture and countryside is also given by the situation in Czechia, where the tradition of husbandry practically ended due to the forced centralisation in the 1950s–80s and since the 1990s; although there has been a small-scale revival of family farms, the agriculture employment dropped down to just about 10 % of rural working population, while over 80 % of the rural working population are commuters (Pělucha, 2012, p. 74). The decrease of direct agricultural influence on the life and environment of communities is also obvious from interviews with local mayors. That is why I again argue for an investigation of rural character independent on agriculture and the associated dynamic processes, and for focus on the environmental relations as such.

2.3 RURAL CHARACTER AS HERITAGE

The most efficient way of grasping rural character in planning practice is through the concept of cultural heritage. Such term directly connotes with the preservation of those features of (built) environment which were recognised as being valuable. A form of the protection then varies from common respect to an institutionally forced regime. But even without going deep into the theory of heritage preservation, it is obvious that the core of it lies in the judgement of values – axiology. To put it simply: the stronger a value is perceived, the stronger is the will to its preservation.

The premise behind my research and this paper is that the rural character of a settlement is a positively perceived value which might be worthy of preserving. The basic issue, however, is that we don't know where the substance of this value exactly lies. Therefore, in practice it is hard to decide what should be preserved and what could be left running its own course. (It is important to realise that everything cannot be preserved because preservation is also restriction). That's one reason why in mundane villages I argue for closer focus on public spaces – the pressure on their change is relatively low compared to the buildings.

The fashion in which it is useful to analyse rural environment is given by our objective – to improve design. The relation between heritage preservation and design, however, is a complex one. I dare to outline it in a very simplified diagram as a gradient which has one end labelled as traditional (as it accepts the heritage as a model for the future) and the other as avant-garde (as it doesn't). Most of the design practice lies somewhere in between these two, therefore, any valuable rural features, which might be useful to incorporate into a new development, will be accepted by more designers if it is be possible to apply them rather creatively as design principles than mechanically as reproductions.

Understanding the ordinary manifestations of rural environment as a valuable cultural heritage has a long tradition in Czech lands. The beginning of serious research of vernacular architecture and settlements could be dated back to the years 1891-1896 and first complaints on the loss of valuable visual features of its environment are present in journals already before the First World War. For most of the 20th century, the interest in such values on a theoretical level was promoted mainly by enthusiasts. As an academic topic, its form was differing in regard to the varying popularity of many discourses. From the beginning of the 1990s, the interest in rural heritage finally became a part of the governmental programme and since

then it has been mostly promoted on the level of local authorities. Tangible results of their effort are also apparent in the considerable amount of popularizing publications which often follow inspiration from Lower Austria and Bavaria – culturally close regions where similar effort began many years sooner.

The popularizations distributed on regional or national level have without any doubts key significance for planning and design practice by the promotion of good practice examples. Their congenital drawback, however, lies in argumentation why some examples should be considered to be better than others. Many of them openly admit that the reason lies in harmony with local tradition. Such honesty on one hand gives a designer a free hand in decision how such tradition might be creatively interpreted,

but at the same time it presents a weakness. As outlined above, for many people the argument of tradition alone doesn't represent a reason strong enough to establish restrictions on one' own creative freedom.

3 LANDSCAPE URBANISM

For a synthetic approach towards rural character, I would like to adopt three disciplines: landscape architecture, urbanism (which in the continental understanding still represents a synthesis of urban design and urban planning) and environmental aesthetics. In order to regard these kindred disciplines as one, I decided to adopt Charles Waldheim's term landscape urbanism, which is maybe the most illustrative.

To address the current issue of rural character from an urbanistic point of view, I would also like to refer to Thomas Sieverts' concept of Zwischenstadt which derives from blurred notion of space "in which the old contrast between city and country has dissolved into a city–country continuum" (Sieverts, 2003, p. x). Such understanding, which directly results from the ongoing suppression of the importance of physical distance, is very fitting for the densely populated central European countryside.

In Czechia, when viewed from the outside, many villages still resemble the pre-collectivisation state of mid-20th century. The gradual redevelopment and especially the new development, however, create a very different environment. A typical situation is represented by a "vernacular" core of an old village, to which new development with a "suburban" microenvironment is connected. The trend seems to lie either in extensive growth of this suburbia, or in progressive metamorphosis of the village core into it. The latter seems to be more probable, considering the growing emphasis on arable land preservation and often underuse of village core development.

The prognosis is somewhat brighter for settlements and territories which are listed and therefore subject of institutionalised heritage preservation regime , however, such approach is very demanding for institutional capacity, which is a notorious problem of the countryside.

For most of Czech countryside, such regime is unavailable. Thus the new development is (save for minor exceptions) regulated only by vague zoning plans in which detail is given by the scale 1:5000, and by general building codes (identical for big cities and for hamlets). Outcoming rather generic character of it is by many already understood as inevitable (often, the opinion of village mayors in my interviews was that it is how things are done now). A possibility of change is seen in a closer connection of urbanism (planning and design) with practices of landscape architecture. Among advocates of such approach are both Charles Waldheim (Waldheim 2016, p 2-29) and Thomas Sieverts (Sieverts 2003, p. 121).

18 I am aware of works which dispute that such distinction could be stated. For example, very interesting arguments in the field of biosemiotics were pointed out by the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann in his seminal book New Paths in Biology (1964). However, for the sake of general inteligibility of urban environment, this conceptualisation is good enough.

3.1 URBANISM AS A LANDSCAPE PHENOMENON

The basic dictum of the Zwischenstadt theory lies in the necessity of increasing the legibility and inteligibility of the environment. In the case of the countryside, it could be interpreted for example as a sensual ability to distinguish the character of an urban streetscape from that of a village. Such aim is also

stated in the third thesis of the famous manifesto Ten Thesis on Landscape Architecture by Dieter Kienast. But are there any such differences innate to either rural or urban environment?

At least one of them is obvious. Cities are places of cultural concentration. It doesn't mean that in the countryside, there is a lack of culture, but that the countryside as a whole stands in relation to other two benchmarks: the wilderness, where the culture is none, and cities, which currently represent the best examples of concentrated cultural effort. As shown by the book of John R. Short Imagined Country (Short 1991), such concept of narrative distinction is well comprehensible at least in European tradition. A more uneasy question is how an increased presence of culture is mirrored in the form of landscape.

A fruitful hint is though provided by the ancient polarity of natural and anthropogenic order.18 The application of such relation to the physical environment enables to distinguish different manifestations in urban and rural environment. Although this optic could seem self-evident (everybody knows that a quality of the rural is its closeness to nature), I would like to emphasise that the decisive factor isn't just the presence of nature, but in particular it is the way how it is present.

Countryside – also called by pleonasm cultural landscape – isn't the same as the so-called natural landscape. As it was outlined in the chapter dedicated to agriculture, such environment is to a great extent created by man – or in better words – it was won from the nature. Christophe Girot distinguishes two archetypes of such winning: the hortus conclusus and the forest clearing (Girot, 2016, p. 13-25).

Even though a particular situation is usually a combination of the two, it is possible to derive the general nature of two different countrysides; the southern, which is by its nature an artificial environment constructed on barren lands and kept alive by complex irrigation systems, and the northern, which is won by continuous cultivation of living wilderness. Not surprisingly, the development of geometry, chronometry and mathematics is closely connected to the landscape of the southern archetype – through the Mesopotamian irrigation system management (Hodgkin, 2005, p. 14-17). Analogously, the less the landscape of the northern archetype is an apparent embodiment of abstract thinking, the more the cities stands out of it – by being closer to the first archetype. Even though such concept taken literally may seem far-fetched, it is illustrative for comprehension of the "empty space" as architecture. But how does it perform?

A high level of human control formally imprinted upon an environment has a fitting expression in a term civilised which is a derivate of city (similarly to an urbane form). A process of civilisation (we may also say urbanisation) is in physical environment expressed through the structuring role of architecture (Veselý 2004, p. 106), shaped by abstract concepts, geometry and ideas (p. 92). Since the purpose of architectonic structures lies in communication, it is clear that the requirement of legibility and inteligibility has a strong impact on the form. Considering the character of contemporary communication, we can see the urban as a (relatively) unified aesthetics tending towards universal, or more precisely, global identity of environment. This inteligibility is characteristic by the growth of anthropogenic order expressed formally, both in the artificial and natural matter. This is what I mean by an urban form of landscape.

3.2 LANDSCAPE AS AN URBAN PHENOMENON

"Ultimately I claim that landscape has always been urban, it is fundamentally urban by definition" (Waldheim 2016b). This quotation from a lecture of Charles Waldheim is directly connected with one of two basic conceptions of landscape – landscape as a scene. Such concept derives from the tradition of landscape painting and is therefore connected with a view from outside (from the comfort of a city). The other concept of landscape is very close to the term environment. This is a view of an insider and it is adopted by the European Landscape Convention. Different understanding of the concept has significant impact on understanding of rural character. The issue is, however, well covered by the relatively young field of environmental aesthetics.

Environmental aesthetics presents a vast field of diverse approaches which relates to the environment in a broad sense of the word. In this paper, I adopt the narrow definition of aesthetics as a matter of how things appear to sense or mind (Sparshott 1972, p. 19). Being aware of the fact that the things are both of narrative and ambient nature , I will focus on the latter as it better suits the objective of this paper and in

that respect, I will also avoid the controversial decision on the ethical content of aesthetics as well as whether to accept the traditional precondition of disinterestedness.

If we look closely at both concepts of landscape from the point of aesthetical judgement on rural character, the limits of both are apparent at the first glance. The concept of scene, which is accepted by many in planning practice as well as in research, is problematic because as in the case of paintings, the assessed object is in fact the picture and not the environment and even if assessed on-site, the concept is still bounded just to selected vistas – which might be useful in special cases, but it could hardly replace the whole. The environmental concept is on the other hand too closely bounded to the narrative dimension, that it is often not clear whether one assesses what he truly senses or what he knows he should be sensing. As Cheryl Foster puts it: “Ambient dimension of aesthetic value emerges as an accompaniment to, rather than a replacement of, the narrative dimension.” (Foster 1998, p. 132).

I would like to adopt an alternative concept which derives from the view of landscape as a scene, but which is extended both in space (time) and scale. Most of the visual assessments I found tend to evaluate a specific setting as if it was an object – that is from an “optimal” direction and distance. An environment, however, must be evaluated in multiple scales (depths of detail) as well as from multiple views.26 Among environmental aesthetics, at least Allen Carlson took this into account when he proposed three such “concepts”: territory, terrain and place (Carlson 80-83). A human being most often experiences an environment on the level of a place. But a place’s character derives from a spatial coherence with higher-scale levels – there is a certain link between preformation across them. For example, if a relation derived from distant view inappropriately changes when coming closer, then the coherence was broken and the character of the place suffers accordingly.

For non-architects a question of scale (depth of details) may seem of little consequence. But it is essential – from the process of perception and conceptualisation to the process of creative projection. The importance of a scale is also decisive for the concept of wholeness which is also a key feature of the living structures’ theory which currently embodies a structural model as close to comprehensible reality of built environment as possible (Alexander 2002). The theory has been further elaborated by Nikos Salingaros, who derived precise scaling hierarchy and other mathematical principles (Salingaros 2008).

4 THESES ON RURAL CHARACTER

4.1 FIGURE-GROUND RELATION

The intensity of rural character of a public space is directly related to the ease with which it can be seen seamlessly as a natural background from which only figures of buildings stand out.

When we consider the already outlined relation of natural and urban as proportional , the most evident feature of the rural environment is the predominance of non-built-up landscape over the built-up. Adopting Alexander’s concept of wholeness, it is easy to identify a set of buildings and their clusters (settlements) as figures on a prevailingly natural background of the landscape.

Since forms of suburban building today hardly differ from the rural (typically a single-unit housing detached in the middle of a plot), the most available feature that creates the rural identity may be not the appearance of the house itself, but rather the semantic horizons of the background in which it is placed (Merlau-Ponty, 2013, p. 95). Thus a problem could emerge inside a dense village, where close contact with the external landscape is often broken. The settlement itself then becomes the background, which means that its rural character is given just by semantics of its vernacular identity. Therefore even a small change of the building type could completely alter the resulting character. That is why it is necessary to pay increased attention to the space in-between the houses.

Even small details could be significant: grass growing through the edge of a blacktop surface creates a much more obvious component of the natural background than the otherwise identical grass-plot with edges emphasised by the sharp edge of a curb framing. Unfortunately, the common practice rather emphasises the spatial division of the public space, which makes it difficult for our subconscious to perceive it as a fluent continuation of the natural background. For the background appears to continue beneath the figure (Merlau-Ponty, 2013, p. 52), it means that if we strip away the houses and gardens, the

resulting public space should give the impression that it is a natural continuation of the landscape surrounding the village settlement. Another hint on how to achieve such an impression is provided by the background's quality of seeming blurred in comparison to the figures (p. 98).

4.2 LEVEL OF URBAN CHARACTER

Urban and rural character aren't complementary terms, but the first contains the latter. Ruralness is a low level of landscape urbanness.

The figure–ground relation is a good tool. But it can only be useful if we understand the nature of the background – the rural landscape. In the space in-between the buildings as well as in open landscape, the growth of anthropogenic order is subconsciously connected to the rise of civilised or urban character. If a city centre is an example of urban character at its maximum level, and wilderness is its absence, then the countryside – a transition between the city and the wilderness – gains various degrees in the whole spectre of this transition.

It is important to realise that the rural environment is not culturally equalized. It contains a hierarchy of differentiated places and localities. The task of a planner or designer is to consider each of them in relation to its surroundings and to decide whether the particular level of urbanness should be kept, increased or decreased so that the result is be harmonious and coherent.

Rural landscape contains many places which create appropriate islands of high-level urban character. Those are e.g. small towns, palaces and villas, pilgrimage places, surroundings of outstanding buildings, surroundings of highways, resorts, campuses and other compounds, etc. Apart of them the environment consists mostly of open landscape and settlements (villages, hamlets, dispersed homesteads). It is my conviction that a harmonious whole could be achieved by maintaining a lower level of urbanness within the settlements and a higher level of it in the surrounding landscape.

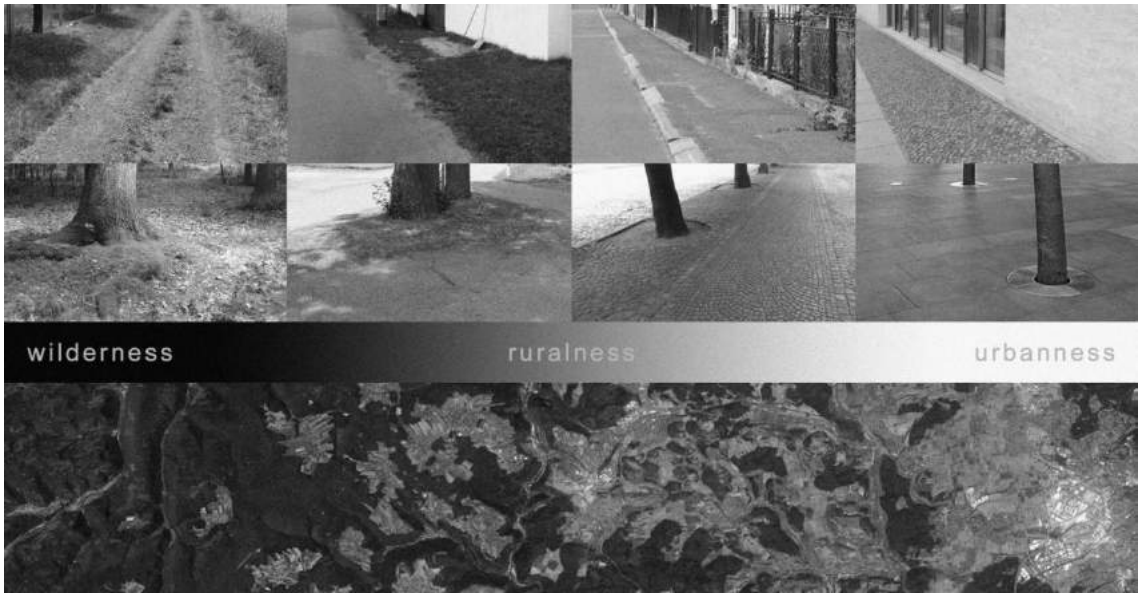

Figure 1 – Countryside as transition between the city and the wilderness
Photo author, satellite photo: Baden-Württemberg, https://www.google.com/maps

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ID 1669 | SOUNDS IN THE CITY WORKSHOPS: INTEGRATING THE SOUNDSCAPE APPROACH IN URBAN DESIGN AND PLANNING PRACTICES

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 SOUNDSCAPE AS A NEW APPROACH TO URBAN NOISE

This paper discusses urban sound and is based on the work of the Sounds in the City2 team, operating out of McGill University in Montreal, Canada. The team's focus is an approach called soundscape, which is a departure from a more traditional approach to urban sound. Urban planning education and practice have traditionally been focused on noise mitigation, concentrating almost exclusively on reducing urban noise levels. However, this method has its limitations because a quiet city is not necessarily an interesting or better one. The soundscape approach, on the other hand, encourages positive sounds in urban environments while mitigating only unwanted sounds and it also necessitates planning the environment far in advance rather than waiting for noise problems to occur. This approach is attracting the attention of many as an innovative and positive shift in the way we create, manage and control sound in our cities. It also presents the opportunity for more collaboration between planners, designers3 and sound experts to improve our urban spaces.

Soundscape has been defined by a diverse International Organization for Standards (ISO) working group of soundscape researchers and professionals as “the acoustic environment as perceived and experienced by people or society, in context” (ISO 12913-1, 2014). The soundscape approach captures the idea that