

Importance of Towers in Landscape of Polish Towns

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Abstract: Since they appeared, vertical structures, i.e. the towers, most often those of churches and town halls in Poland have featured large importance both in rural and urban systems and also as the factors shaping urban interior and panoramas of localities. Independently of when they came into being, they always were important composition elements of landscape. Many of them survived to current time and sometimes they are even of medieval origins. We should remember that they are silent witnesses of past times, the material values left us by our ancestors. For this reason, they shall be protected against destructive actions of weather conditions and flow of time.

Key-Words: Landscape, Middle Ages, Predominant Feature, Tower, Town, Urban Planning

1 Introduction

Tower-like structures in Polish territories distinguished themselves with exceptional importance since the beginnings of conscious foundations of residential hamlets, starting from Biskupin-like settlements, via medieval towns, and till the modern urban planning. Much less significance was attached to towers as architectonic or urban predominant features in successive decades. They were partially replaced by new elements necessary in modern urban development.

Independently of the time they came into being, towers were always important composition elements of landscape. They were prevailing components not only in their spatial function, but also in artistic and historical respects. Towers creating architectural height features are at the same time classified among elements of our cultural heritage. For the sake of their forms, historical values and their improving effect on the landscape, towers should be covered by special care both by relevant governmental services and local societies.

2 Outline of tower construction on Poland's territory

The first structures, which first of all were to provide protection against adverse weather conditions and predatory animals, featured exceptionally simplicity of form and really primitive design. In general, they made up little villages composed of just a few randomly scattered homesteads.



Fig. 1. Biskupin. Reconstructed gateway tower
(fot. R. Gubańska)

Some 500-400 years BC the situation was quite different. A conscious and well thought out urban conception was then used [9]. In numerous settlement units of so called Biskupin-like type, constructed mainly on islands due to safety reasons, parallel streets were delineated and the cottages were located along them in series. Additionally, "a ring road" was marked out around all houses to improve communication. An outline of settlement was generally coincident with the shape of the island being settled. To ensure better defensive properties, all settlement was fortified with soil and wood embankment provided with single entrance shaped to the gateway tower (Fig. 1). It distinguished from other buildings with its height, so it was used as a vantage point to observe surroundings, and especially the road leading to the settlement.

The most intense development of towers over the Polish lands fell on Gothic period. Both the planning concept of ideal town and the ideology disseminated in Middle Ages have contributed to this situation.

The model scheme of medieval town was based on a chequered pattern of streets [6]. The centre was occupied by a marketplace shaped close to the square form (Fig. 2) used for formal and commercial purposes. A town hall was built in the centre with characteristic height feature of tower form. Eight (or twelve, depending on market square size) streets were routed from marketplace corners situated at right angles each other. Facades of marketplace frontages were used for facilities with important function for inhabitants. One parcel in close vicinity to the market square was intended for a temple featuring precisely elaborated tower or two towers.



Fig. 2. Chełmno. Marketplace viewed from church tower (fot. R. Gubańska)

The residence of the town owner was generally situated out-of-the-way and surrounded with additional fortifications. At first medieval urban units were protected against danger with massive ramparts. In further development of medieval fortifications, the ramparts were supported with turret and towers, and during the last stage – with barbicans located just before the main gateway towers leading into the town. Inside the fortifications, a small part of land was intended for further development of the town, however it was soon developed with residential houses. Medieval settlement structures featured with intense compact development and narrow streets.

It was Middle Ages when characteristic structure of Polish towns was developed and consolidated; now it is clearly received, generally in case of small settlement structures.



Fig. 3. Toruń. Typical panorama of medieval town with clear height dominating features of towers (fot. J. Gubański)

While observing a panorama of selected town (Fig. 3), we see the line of residential buildings which here and there is replaced with greenery. In the foreground, there are picturesquely illuminated medieval fortifications with towers and gateway towers. The view would be of monotonous reception without towers overlooking the city.

Towers of churches and town halls were also important elements of town planning arrangements in times of Renaissance and Baroque. They were clearly perceived in their horizontal projection and also, or first and foremost, in their elevation. They differ from those of medieval times in more extended form and decorativeness. In general, they were admired for the wealth of architectonic details. Also now they fill passers-by and tourists with awe.

In successive decades, urbanists have been and they still are aware of the importance of such vertical predominant features as surely are both those historical ones and those currently constructed or planned towers. Special great importance was attached to structures placed at the closures of streets.

Regrettably, they are no longer such characteristic for the panorama of modern towns as they were in past times. This is due to such factors, to name a few, as enlargement of urban structures, expansion of functionalities, development of communication systems, mainly for wheel vehicles [10]. The former function of towers as the predominating elements is more and more commonly taken over by sky-scrapers. In their close vicinity, the historical ancient towers lose their value and “are lost” among them. Hence, no effort shall be spared to highlight at least those historical and ancient towers in modern urban space.

3 Typology of towers

Towers can be classified to their construction material, time of origin and functionalities. Obviously, such classification is of conventional nature. This

systematic refers to the periods existing in architecture development. So, we are saying about Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, historicizing (originated in 19th century) or the modern ones. We should remember that towers from much earlier times or from so called transitory periods have also survived.

Over the territory of Poland, the oldest towers include those of Romanesque origin, however those shaped to Gothic patterns are definitely much numerous. They are parts of buildings which dominated not only with their overall dimensions but also their functions: churches which represented clerical authorities, and town halls – the mark of secular power.



Fig. 4. Malbork. Example of medieval tower (fot. R. Gubańska)

Medieval towers distinguished themselves with simple form (Fig. 4): basic solids (mainly rectangular prisms) were put one on the other. Architectonic details include regularly spaced windows, lizenes, arcade cornices and specific wall coping formed as merlots. As a rule, the structure was covered with hip roof (so called pavilion roof).



Fig. 5. Chełmża. Renaissance coping of church tower (fot. J. Gubański)

Renaissance towers were completely different. As everybody knows, Renaissance preferred horizontal arrangements; hence the structures of that time did not climb up so much as in previous period. Generally, polygonal buildings were coped with domes. They featured repeated onion domes placed one onto another which were separated each other by so called lanterns – openwork structures which created arcade spans.

Both during Renaissance and Baroque, a common method was to place domes, either with splendid Renaissance forms or Baroque domes abounding in shapes, onto earlier, most often survived medieval tower (Fig. 5).



Fig. 6. Gniezno. Baroque domes on cathedral towers (fot. J. Gubański)

It is commonly known that Baroque has operated in architecture with forms taken from previous era, i.e. Renaissance. Basic architectonic compositions and solutions remained, however they subject to important transformations. Sometimes, even the clarity of construction has been lost. Similar situation refers to the tower constructions. Then became again the predominant features in urban and landscape systems. They were intentionally situated in visually clear positions, either on natural rises or especially formed for this purpose, or else on closures of visual axes.

Baroque towers were definitely higher than those of Renaissance, however they were also covered with domes. Baroque finials of towers (Fig. 6) distinguished with diversity of shapes and details unusual in earlier times. Even if they created a multi-level structure, each part was planned separately. Likewise the solutions applied in buildings, lines shaped on circle circumferences were prevailing. Due to such actions, Baroque towers featured some kind of form dynamics.

In successive decades the patterns taken from previous periods were commonly used. They were merely transformed and adapted to the needs of specific period. Similar situation referred also to tower

structures. New constructional potentials arose not earlier than in industrial era due to application of cast iron and then steel as constructional materials.

At present, construction of tower-like building creates no major problem as more and more modern building technologies are available as well as large variety of building materials (among other, those with higher and higher strength) and also highly advanced specialty constructional calculation algorithms. Each facility under design is treated individually, hence we can say about their uniqueness.

Totally different classification of towers may be used when their functional program is considered.

One of the oldest were defensive towers usually located in ramparts of castles, fortified churches or town fortifications (among them the gateway tower was dominating with its overall dimensions and height).

In Middle Ages, there were constructed towers with residential functions. At first, they were components of castles, while then they were also build as self-reliant structures.

Church towers are considered as the most important and numerous; among their functions was also to draw attention to the temple and to emphasis their importance within the closest vicinity.

Towers existing close to town halls or being their integral parts are classified as those of stately functions. Like the town halls themselves, they bore testimony to the importance and wealth of towns they represent with their appearance.

Another type of towers to distinguish are so called stairs tower which, as their name suggest, contain staircases in their interior. Frequently, they created interesting characteristics in series of selected facades or engaging elements shaping the body of buildings.

4 Significance of towers and architectonic/urban development predominant elements of landscape

Lowlands are prevailing type of landscape in Poland, while mountains cover minor territory on the south. What can be seen most frequently are: picturesque cornfields and meadowlands cut with river channels and their tributaries, areas of forests and woods. Some variety is introduced by building development emerging here and there which has, as ever, arranged the human being living space.

Strips of residential buildings with surrounding greenery appearing occasionally in the horizon line diversify the environment to some degree. The landscape gains dynamics when height elements appear. They are mainly the towers of churches and town halls which have been shaped over historical

development of architecture and town planning. In Middle Ages, towers were given symbolical value, they manifested significance and wealth of power (laity and clergy). The towers started to be used consciously to shape urban systems and panoramas so characteristic for Polish cultural landscape.



Fig. 7. Jutrosin. Town panorama with characteristic predominating elements (fot. J. Gubański)

The photo above (Fig.7) illustrates typical view of urbanized location. The foreground includes arable fields with shimmering river mirror. At some distance, a strip of residential and farm buildings coinciding with horizon line and with predominating towers, somewhat lower one of town hall on the left and that of local parish church on the right hand side. The blue of the sky closes the panorama outlined and creates at the same its background. This is an excellent example of the function of tower as the predominant element both in architectonic and urban systems.



Fig. 8. Gdańsk. Tower as architectonic predominant feature and scenic closure of the street (fot. R. Gubańska)

Towers as architectonic predominant features were commonly used in urban compositions. They

predominated not only over adjacent buildings but frequently created scenic closures of streets (Fig. 8). To achieve the intended impression, they were incorporated at the end of one frontage of the street. Final effect was always appropriate, aesthetic reception of the space – interesting as can be said.

Towers were used not only for architectonic composition purposes. Due to their height, they were also excellent observation points to look around the surroundings to alert in case of any hazard is detected. Now, they provide also viewing possibilities allowing to admire nearby views and landscape.

5 Suggested forms of protection

On the grounds of aforementioned discussion, the towers deserve protection due to their huge impact affecting directly the composition and aesthetics of landscape. This means not only the passive protection provided by relevant regulations, but first and foremost the real one depending predominantly on architects, landscape architects, urbanists and clerks in specific administration bodies.

Each form of protection should be preceded by thorough review of landscape transformations for specific location so as not to lose the significance of existing predominant feature which often represents high historical and artistic values. Such reviews ordered by respective bodies of conservation services could be included in historical restoration studies and serve as one of various recommendations for town and country development plans – the basic documents binding in spatial planning.

Special attention shall be paid to current survived neighbourhood of towers, i.e. whether the towers are appropriately highlighted, whether nothing obstructs their view, or whether new structures appeared competitive in height terms. Thus, at first the area of conservation protection need to be specified with distances allowed for nearby new buildings to be constructed. Then, a landscape protection zone should be established wherein the cubage and height of new facilities need to be controlled, so as they make no competition to the protected tower. In successive stage, so called view strips and the best exposition routes [5] need to be envisaged. Their main purpose was to leave a free undeveloped space to strengthen both the vertical perception and impression-aesthetic sensation. Should the above rules be observed, the basic functions of existing towers as fundamental architectonic and urban predominating feature, so characteristic for Polish landscape, could be preserved.

6 Conclusion

The landscape is one of the fundamental elements of our environment. Natural and cultural landscapes are equally important for people of our days. Whether it

refers to a single tree standing alone among picturesque fields, or rich Baroque domes topping towers of local church, the predominant height feature determines our aesthetic impressions from landscape reception.

Over centuries, these have been the towers which have established as vertical elements directly affecting landscape panoramas. Towers have survived to our times, some of them even from Middle Ages. We should remember that they are silent witnesses of past time, material goods inherited from our predecessors. Due to the respect for our past generations and events we should protect the cultural heritage left for us.

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