

In the Search of Inspiration – Color and Pattern Harmonies in the Traditional Rural Architecture in Poland

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***Abstract:** Main goal of this article is to select and define those attributes of color use in traditional rural architecture in Poland, that were responsible for their high aesthetic value. Author tries to answer to the question, if some traditional color and material solutions are still possible to be used today. Analysis of the traditional color compositions are based on professional literature descriptions, archive materials from PIBS_ZL (National Institute on Folk Art Research), XIX c. paintings and photographs of buildings found in open-air museums or in situ.*

Author also finds analogies between so called Great Art and Folk Art through:

- *comparison of contemporary abstractionist paintings and color compositions of traditional facades and*
- *creation of abstractionist compositions based on colors of rural houses.*

Results of those analyses and it's confrontation with "color chaos" effect of present polish rural areas, enables to formulate conclusion, that traditions of color use in regional architecture could be treated as inspiration and base for professional color design method for modern rural settlements.

To be in accordance with traditional solutions, there is no need to copy past color selections. It is only needed to follow universal rules of composing – admitted in contemporary Great Art and present also in Folk Art. Using of this rules widens the spectrum of formal solutions, which may be used in color design in the future.

***Keywords:** color, pattern, harmony*

1 Introduction

It is common knowledge that color may be used as a tool of ordering rural space. The conscious and proper use of colors can contribute to the visual improvement of landscape and architectural composition [10]. But in the rural areas of Poland, color remains a neglected or even omitted element in the design process and its choice is usually given to the investor or contractor. On the one hand, the unlimited pallet of materials and colors gives immense creative potential. However, the harmony of many tones requires more extensive knowledge and

sense of colors than ever before. The intuitive selection of colors is increasingly failing as the number of potential choices is too high [4]. **Research confirms the existence of the rich tradition of using colors in the architecture of rural areas in Poland, which has been one of the elements of regional identification and a source of harmony between the elements of architecture and landscape** [7,8,9,10]. The purpose of this study involves specifying and defining the features of using color in traditional rural architecture, which has been decisive for its high aesthetic value. The author also tries to find an answer to the question whether traditional color and material solutions used in rural architecture can be used in the modern architecture and whether guidelines for developing spatial order in the rural areas of Poland can be formulated on their basis.

2 Contemporary Crisis of the Color Composition in the Architecture and Landscape of Polish Villages – Overview of Problems

In the 1990s there has been a considerable **breakthrough in developing color compositions of rural complexes in Poland**. It was entailed by the transition into market economy, radical improvement in the market supply with construction materials and a broad range of the available colors of plasters, paints, elevation cladding and roof covering. This increased supply was not associated with any limitations or guidelines concerning the use of the mentioned materials, which caused far-fetched visual transformations of rural areas connected not only with the growing spatial chaos but also with the chaos in materials and colors. This phenomenon can be referred to as the “**color globalisation**”, that is visual unification of architecture in all regions and disappearing identification of a place through color. Together with limitations on the use of local materials (such as stone, wood, thatched roof, shingles), a sort of a “**chromatic invasion**” of synthetic materials having a full range of colors occurred. The buildings made of new materials and incorporated into the rural landscape easily destroyed its natural visual coherence.

One of the reasons for the negative aesthetic reception of contemporary rural complexes in Poland is the **compilation of objects (their color planes) differing in terms of scale, proportion, material and color, so the absence of unifying factors being an elementary element of the impression of harmony** [5]. The **discrepancy in buildings** is a particular problem. Modern objects co-exist with wooden houses, brick buildings and buildings made of limestone, buildings covered with eternit and stone cubes of the 1960s. Another problem of contemporary rural complexes in the range of their color composition is the **shaping of building colors regardless of the traditional and natural conditions but in accordance with the style or color fashion**. The **lack of conscious shaping**

of harmony between architectural objects and separation from the background are noticeable. In the rural landscape, there are objects which are often interesting as single “works of art” but substantially differ from the desired colors of the whole complex. In the scale of the open landscape, considerable **diversification of the colors of roofs causes the lack of a visible image of a rural complex as a whole**. Buildings are “read” as single accents in the landscape while colors of contemporary roofs frequently create a negative contrast to the surroundings due to their excessive brightness, saturation or wrongly chosen tone of the color.



Fig.1 Typical present polish rural street – different forms, materials and colors disables possibility of visual harmony – Przegonia Duchowna near Cracow (photo by author, 2005r.)

The fact that in recent years one could observe certain positive tendencies in developing color compositions in the Polish rural complexes, including the **change in the proportions of the planes of colorful walls** (modern buildings mainly have one storey or one storey and a half) or the come-back of sloping roofs, **can bring some optimism**. Positive changes can also be observed in the awareness of the society, e.g. higher culture and aesthetic awareness of investors evident in aiming at the **thorough finishing of buildings or care for the development of the closest surroundings of the building**. An increase is observed in the **interest in building traditions and local natural materials** as well as the tendency to use **dark and matt roof covering**. Also the **high quality** of the available coloring materials and their high resistance to aging are important. This affects the durability of colors and guarantees high-level aesthetic value for a long term. **These tendencies give hope of the gradual improvement of the appearance of rural complexes in the range of their color composition.**

3 Analysis of Color Compositions of a Traditional Rural Complex

The analysis of the color composition of a traditional rural complex has been conducted on the basis of the available archive materials of the National Institute for Folk Art Research (Państwowy Instytut Badania Sztuki Ludowej) collected at the Ethnographic Museum of Krakow, documenting the colors of traditional rural facilities in different regions of Poland, illustrations and descriptions found in literature [1,3,6], works of landscape painters of the 19th century and own examinations of the relics of traditional architecture collected in heritage parks as well as preserved in situ. Almost all views of a traditional village preserved on the canvas of painters or drawings of ethnographers show **the color harmony between architectural objects and the landscape**. The visual unity of architectural forms with the surroundings was largely connected with the natural building materials used in their construction, so wood, stone, clay or brick whose dark, matt colors blended with the landscape.

The use of the material available in situ has led to a specific homogeneity of the created architecture, often independently of the function of the object. This has brought the aesthetics named by professor W. Gruszczyński the “**aesthetics of mushrooms**”, i.e. the complex with uniform character but different details [2].

The homogeneity of the material used in its natural color was not the source of visual boredom or artistic poverty but, quite on the contrary, constituted high aesthetic value. Even the use of one material in its natural color (as e.g. in the shelters in the Podhale region) gave an interesting artistic effect as the uniform colors were accompanied by differing textures.

As a result of the analysis of the color composition of the rural architectural and landscape complex, the following characteristics were enumerated:

- **color and material uniformity of roof covering** – as the most important factor of the visual integration of the complex;
- **color composition mainly based on the principles of harmony through analogy** – similarities between the colors of roof covering and landscape, which made large roofs fit in the surroundings;
- **characteristic proportions and scale of color layers** – large, dark planes of roofs and narrow strips of bright walls – the impression of solid forms being “detached” from the ground;
- **similarity of forms, sizes and proportions of the planes of colorful walls and roofs of objects** that constitute a given complex giving it considerable density and cohesion of the entire composition.

Traditional objects built in the Polish villages were characterized not only by color harmony with the surroundings but also **the harmony of colors and materials within the building.**

The drawings of the elevations of wooden houses contained not only the beauty but also **logics, order and harmony of colors.** The visual shaping of the body of the building went not only through formal means but also through the use of various juxtapositions of materials and textures, decorations and ornaments. **Color was used in the way reflecting the function and structure of the building, so in a logical and natural manner.** The used color did not falsify material; it was a natural color of the material which, thanks to its porous texture and “micro-polychrome”, did not make an impression of a large space of uniform color and gave interesting artistic effects within one color level.

Attention should also be paid to **the proportions and scale of the color level.** **Strong horizontal systems** were also characteristic. They were emphasized with the strip system of framework with the predominant large roof surface with strongly protruding eaves giving the shading of the wall level and making its local color darker. In consequence, even the wall surface whitened with lime did not cause a sharp color contrast in the environment.

The applied color was generally used in small quantities, in a way emphasizing the form of the object. For example, the painting of the framework in stripes, which was popular in the south of Poland, stressed the horizontal arrangement of the house, giving it **rhythm and ornamental value.**

It can be stated that the colors used in traditional rural buildings were in many cases very brave. However, the highly-saturated colors added the element of dynamism and expression to the subdued composition of natural colors. **The logical allocation of colors to particular elements of architecture of these objects as well as the right proportions and scale of color levels gave high aesthetic value to the colorful compositions of traditional elevations.**

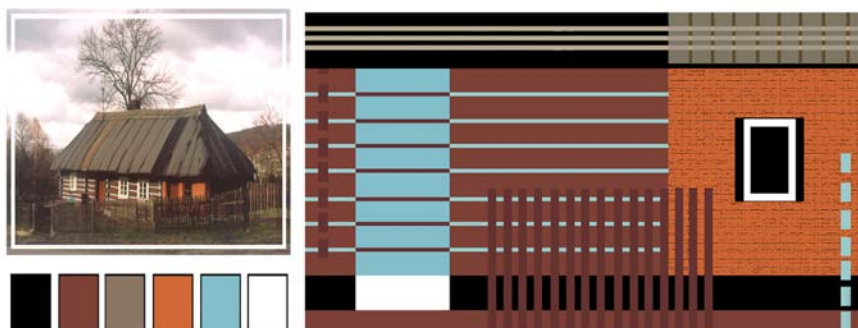


Fig.2 Traditional color composition analyze – abstract composition with selected attributes – Typical Cracow’s cottage “in stripes” – village Czernichów (photo and drawing by author 2005).

The author posed a question: **how to take advantage of the composition and color rules of traditional rural architecture with reference to contemporary projects for rural areas?** In order to answer this question, the author also analyzed traditional color compositions by **looking for the analogy between Folk Art and High Art.** Already Stanisław Witkiewicz, great XIXth c. polish artist, saw developmental tendencies in folk art only in close connection with individual fields of High Art. He openly opposed to the creation of “Folk Art reserves” that only artificially continued this art in the conditions in which it should naturally die if it cannot assume forms corresponding with the needs of the times [11]. **The analogies between artistic solutions used in traditional architecture and problems tackled in the works of contemporary art were sought through the comparative analysis of selected examples of the works of modern abstract art and color compositions of the elevations of traditional cottages and creation of one’s own abstract compositions on the basis of color compositions of cottage elevations, with the selected characteristics emphasized.**

In consequence of the analysis, the following analogies were enumerated between color compositions of the elevation planes of rural architecture and abstract images:

- rhythm – vertical and horizontal articulation;
- use of a limited set of colors to create varied compositions;
- contrastive juxtaposition of colors – the most frequent contrast is that of fair/dark and warm/cold colors;
- diversified colors, depending on the function and form of components;
- visual partitioning of the body of the building into elements of smaller composition;
- positive proportions of color levels, balance of all composition elements.



Fig.3 Great Art versus Folk Art – searching for composition analogies: Cottage from village Ropianka (photo by author 2004) and J. Albers, Untitled, 1973

4 Summary and conclusions

Many factors affected the high aesthetic value of rural architecture. One of these factors is the color which, although used spontaneously and intuitively, was a source of beauty, order and harmony between architecture and the landscape of rural areas.

The results of the traditional analysis of the color composition and their confrontation with the modern phenomenon of “color chaos” in the rural areas of Poland lead to the conclusion that **the tradition of using color in regional architecture can be treated not only as an interesting phenomenon from the distant past but also as an element of inspiration being a basis for creating the professional and effective method of selecting color in the modern architecture of the Polish countryside.** In order to preserve the faithfulness of the tradition, one need not copy faithfully the color solutions used in traditional architecture. Universal principles of composition adopted in the modern High Art and currently also in the Folk Art are sufficient. The use of these principles also simultaneously extends the range of formal solutions which may be used in color compositions of the contemporary rural architecture.

The design of color compositions for rural complexes should take into account the color conditions of landscape, the colors of traditional architectural objects and colors of newly built objects. Color harmony between these three components must also be ensured.

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