

LIVEABILITY IN A GARDEN CITY – A CASE STUDY OF PODKOWA LEŚNA (POLAND)

*Dzīves kvalitāte dārzu pilsētā –
tematisks pētījums par Podkowa Leśna (Polija)*

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Abstract. *The first garden cities in the early 20th century were designed to provide a wholesome alternative to increasingly congested cities. They were characterised by low-density building amongst generous verdure, the presence of open public spaces, and of cultural and educational institutions. Interestingly, the goals and priorities of the Garden City Movement presaged much of the agenda of contemporary sustainable planning. This article sets out to highlight the ecological and social potential of the garden city model and to assess its relevance for current debates on liveability through a case study of Podkowa Leśna in Poland. The argument draws considerably on the analysis of reports issued by the municipal council of Podkowa Leśna and the Town and Country Planning Association in Britain. One of the main issues addressed concerns the heritage of green and open spaces and the legacy of community values in historical garden cities.*

Keywords: *cultural heritage, community, garden city, green spaces, identity, liveability, social life, sustainability.*

Introduction

The idea of a garden city emerged in response to the effects and most pressing threats of the 19th century industrialization and urbanization. The founder of the concept, Sir Ebenezer Howard, in his *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, published in 1902, put forward a theory that the town and the country acted like magnets, attracting people by different benefits. He concluded therefore that an ideal city should combine both: the contact with nature, open space and clean air of the country with economic, social, cultural and educational opportunities of the town (Howard, 1965: 46-47). Howard's proposal for the construction of garden cities was first and foremost a social and political programme, which he translated into an urban vision at the root of which lay the idea of community cooperation, civic spirit and social fairness. In 1903 the world's first garden city, Letchworth, was laid out by architects Unwin and Parker.

The garden city project offered an ideological springboard and an architectural and planning model for a marked variety of national developments across Europe, which during 1920s and 1930s coalesced into the dynamic International Garden City Movement. Within two decades, countries such as Germany, France, Belgium, Hungary, Denmark, Austria, Poland and Latvia had built their own versions. The spread of the movement was not confined to Europe, but reached around the world, making its way, among others, to the USA, Japan and Australia. Garden cities and garden suburbs built before the World War II, such as Hellerau in Germany, Suresnes in France, Mezaparks in Latvia, or outside Europe, Radburn in the US or Denenchofu in Japan, are all characterised by a sensitive integration of built environment with green and open spaces. The relevance of the Garden City Movement did not die out after the Second World War. Adapted to new economic and social realities of the 1950s and 60s, the idea found continuity in the development of New Towns such as Stevenage in Britain, Vällingby in Sweden, Tapiola in Finland, and others.

Since the publication of *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, followed by the foundation of Letchworth, the garden city theory and practice has inspired substantial literature on the subject, historical as well as critical. Its focus has been on social, ideological and architectural aspects of the Movement, with limited elaboration of its pioneering environmental mission and management of green and open spaces. The notable exception was Walter Creese's early study

The Search for Environment: the Garden City Before and After, published in 1966. At the outset of the new millennium the legacy of the garden city idea was revisited in the wake of ecological movements and the trend towards sustainable development. The 1990s marked a rise of interest in the historical garden cities in the writings by British researchers, such as *The Garden City, past, present and future*, edited by Stephen V. Ward (1992). Two decades later, in 2011, the relevance of a garden city idea was reassessed in the Town and Country Planning Association's report *Re-imagining garden cities for the 21st century*.

One of the earliest and most influential advocates of garden cities, Lewis Mumford, referred to the Movement as “building a life-centred civilization” (Mumford, 1945: 29). His reflection, voiced over sixty years ago, is much in resonance with what today has been defined by Jan Gehl, as “life-between-buildings”, both emphasizing that the quality of life is central to urban experience. Today, at the time of ongoing debates about how architecture and urban planning can contribute to building sustainable communities and enhance liveability of towns and cities, it seems apposite to look more closely at the lessons that the garden city model can offer after having been tested in practice for over a century. This article sets out to probe more deeply into the liveability and sustainability potential of a garden city model on the example of Podkowa Leśna in Poland, which has been a popular residential area since its development in the 1920s. Throughout decades marked by fundamental political and social changes in post-war Poland, the town has safeguarded its sense of historical, cultural and social continuity and identity, and in 2005, despite economic pressures, its council voted to adopt the policy of sustainable development for the period of 2005-2014. Six years after its implementation, the findings of the survey on the quality of life and public services in Podkowa Leśna, confirmed that its residents regard their town as a good place to live, primarily for environmental reasons and the proximity of nature (Mantey, 2011: 11-12). The evidence in this article has been based largely on the reports issued by Podkowa Leśna city council, notably: the Report on the State of Podkowa Leśna (2004), the Strategy of the Sustainable Development of Podkowa Leśna Garden City for the Years 2005-2014 (2005) and a report on the Survey of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of Podkowa Leśna on the Quality of Life and Public Services (2011). A frame of reference for the present analysis has been provided by a case-based argument on liveability and sustainability of small towns offered by Knox and Mayer in *Small Town Sustainability. Economic, Social and Environmental Innovation* (2009).

The Development of Podkowa Leśna Garden City 1925-1939

The British idea of garden cities reached Polish territories already before the First World War and one of its major proponents, a doctor and sanitary reformer Władysław Dobrzyński, was among the co-founders of the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Association in London in 1913 (Czyżewski, 2009: 129). The outbreak of the war put an end to the earliest garden city initiatives but the idea was revisited after 1918 in a newly restored state, seeking energetically to revive its economy and define its identity both in terms of tradition and modernity, the latter epitomised, among others, by the electrification of the country. The development of Podkowa Leśna (the name meaning “A Horseshoe of Woods”) was made possible thanks to the construction of the Electric Rail Service – EKD, which connected the lands situated 25 kilometres south west of Warsaw with the capital (Wróblewski, 2003: 33-36). In 1925, the foundation stone was laid for the garden city. Its master plan by a Warsaw architect Antoni Jawornicki echoed the British models with plots confined within a horseshoe of woodland. On the south-east, the site was bounded by The Młochowski Forest, which is today the environmentally protected area of 600 hectares (59 % of the overall area of Podkowa Leśna). The size of the plots was limited to 1000-6000 square metres providing ample space for woodland gardening (Wróblewski, 2003: 52). A substantial chunk of land in the vicinity of the railway station – 14 hectares of forested and landscaped area – was allocated for the City Park,

with the artificial lake at the centre, the building of the Sporting Club and recreational facilities including tennis courts and toboggan-runs (Tyszka, 2006: 36-38). In 1933 the Roman Catholic church of Saint Christopher's was erected in the Art Deco style, with a garden conceived as the extension of the space for religious service, both part of the overall conception of “the green-church” (Wróblewski, 2003: 94-95). The city also had a Post Office and construction of the school began before the outbreak of the war.

Podkowa Leśna originated as a private company enterprise in the estates that had belonged to the family of wealthy industrialists, and their former owner, Stanisław Lilpop, was one of the major shareholders of the enterprise. The houses were privately owned and before the war a number of them served as second homes for their Warsaw owners. In architectural terms the three styles of building, representative of the trends elsewhere in the country, prevailed: the so-called “manorial” style, which revived the neo-classical tradition of small country houses of landed gentry, the neo-vernacular idiom adopted for wooden houses and lastly, international modernism.

Podkowa Leśna Community 1925-2015

Since its beginnings Podkowa Leśna has been a town with a strong community spirit and a tradition of intellectual and artistic life. Already before the foundation of the garden city the place had a few summer houses and its wooden villa, Aida was frequented by Warsaw writers and poets. Until the outbreak of the World War II Podkowa Leśna played a role of an informal literary salon. During the war the town provided refuge for a few hundred of exiles from Warsaw, who found themselves homeless after the Uprising of 1944. Podkowa Leśna was also a stronghold of Polish Home Army that cooperated with Polish government in exile in London, and with the change of the political system the garden city fell out of favour with a new communist government for ideological reasons. The turn of fortune and the hardships of existence that many pre-war owners faced in the changed political conditions, combined with the lack of funds, building materials and the remarkable economic inefficiency of the new government contributed to degradation of the garden city and in particular of its public spaces and buildings that were not properly maintained and looked after. The building of the Sporting Club went into decline and the City Park was abandoned and partly devastated (Tyszka, 2006: 36-39). In the 1980s, with the rise of the Solidarity Movement, Saint Christopher's church became one of the strongholds of political opposition. After the political transformation of 1989 Podkowa Leśna, like the rest of Poland, faced the challenges and opportunities of newly restored democracy and with the accession of Poland into the EU it became one of the successful beneficiaries of the EU Programme of Regional Development. Today, twenty five years later, the liveability of Podkowa Leśna can be ranked as one of the highest in Poland on the basis of its population and land value. Although one third of its inhabitants settled there after 1989 and despite the fact that the population is ageing and the birth rates are low, the number of inhabitants in the last decade has been unchangeably oscillating around 3600 due to the influx of newcomers (*Strategia*, 2005: 20). Those who choose Podkowa as their place of residence are reportedly attracted by its slower in comparison with Warsaw pace of life, abundant greenery, rich natural and cultural heritage and a distinctive sense of self-identity that has survived until today and is being locally cultivated and sustained (Mantey, 2011: 22).

Garden City Identity and a Sense of Place

The life patterns of Podkowa Leśna match those of small towns (*Strategia*, 2005: 11-13). Unlike, however, small hill towns in Italy, market towns in the UK or the early European university towns that can all draw upon their rich historical heritage to refine their identity in the age of globalisation, garden cities, with their comparatively short histories cannot root theirs in

the continuity of centuries` long life and custom. It requires therefore a greater effort and determination on the part of their inhabitants to establish their place in the 21st century. In Podkowa Leśna the sense of place and of historical and cultural heritage is strong and enhanced through numerous activities, initiated by local authorities and over a dozen NGOs. The origins of the oldest one, *Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Miasta Ogródu Podkowa Leśna* (Society of the Friends of Podkowa Leśna Garden City), go back to 1932 and *Stowarzyszenie* is an influential consulting body, which, among others successfully resisted the idea of transforming the pre-war Sporting Club into a place of limited access (Wróblewski, 2003: 57). It is involved in publishing books on the garden city's past and present and has launched the *Biblioteka Podkowieńska* (Podkowa Library) series in which a number of titles were published. *Stowarzyszenie* is also responsible for the publication of a local cultural magazine, *Podkowieński Magazyn Kulturalny* (Żukowska-Maziarska, 2000: 139-168).

Since 2007 the role of the community hub has been played by the Centre of Culture and Citizens' Initiatives, launched through the endeavour of local community and housed in the pre-war Sporting Club in the City Park. The revitalisation of the former Sporting Club and its adaptation for the seat of the newly established Centre was a flagship cultural development of the last decade, successfully completed with EU funding. The Centre is an important venue for concerts, exhibitions, lectures, New Year balls and group singing. Together with the Municipal Centre of Culture MOK, active since 1986, it is committed to lifelong education, hosting the local Open University "Generations". Music is one of the assets of the community, among whose members have been musicians, composers, singers and music critics, and the Centre of Culture and Citizens' Initiatives, together with Saint Christopher's church and the local Museum of Anna and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, the writer's house at nearby Stawisko, is one of the three venues in which music events regularly take place. Both Centres, the Museum and the local library play an important role as the community's "third places", which in Ray Oldenburg's description are (in contrast to homes and work places) "the core settings of informal public life": reading, conversation or storytelling, easily accessible and open to all (Knox, Mayer, 2009: 25). Several cafes and restaurants, mostly situated centrally, and each different in character, also fulfil that role. One of them, which opens up to the playground by the church is an ideal place for parents who can watch their children play out, another serves also as a small local gallery, selling jewellery and pottery.

Podkowa Leśna Green Spaces

The early development of Podkowa Leśna in the area of arable lands, meadows and pastures, bounded by woodland, since the beginnings has attracted potential inhabitants with a promise of retreat into nature, yet within an easy reach of Warsaw. Its green areas are still one of the town's major assets, apparently not least because of the role of greenery for the well being, evidenced in research findings since the early 1980s (Grahm, Stigsdotter, 2003: 2). Swedish researchers, Grahm and Stigsdotter, investigating the relationship between the use of outdoor environments and stress relief report that "verdure and nature as such accelerate human beings' recovery from stress" (Grahm, Stigsdotter, 2003: 4), while the authors of report on urban green, issued in 2002 by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions in the UK offer an in-depth analysis of the social, environmental and economic benefits of green spaces (DLR 2002: 79-90). In the course of ninety years of the garden city's existence, some of its green areas were landscaped to become public spaces, such as the City Park and the Square of Polish-Hungarian Friendship, while others were left intact, and listed in the 1970s and 80s as wildlife and nature preserves. Two of them are in the Młochowski Forest: Bolesław Hryniewiecki's Nature Preserve, which is one of the oldest concentrations of oaks and pines in the Mazovia district, and "Zaborów" Nature Preserve listed to protect breeding nests of rare birds, such as black and middle spotted woodpeckers, hoopoe, and hawfinch. The Jay Ravine

Preserve, is within the precinct of the town (*Strategia*, 2005: 26). This diversity of species of birds has encouraged bird watching as one of locally run activities. The potential of green areas is explored for outdoor activities, which since the beginning have been part of local lifestyle. In 2013 Podkowa Leśna Running Society was founded to promote healthy recreation, and it has since organised annual Podkowa Runs. The tracking routes crossing the town, and leading through its nature preserves together with cycling routes (*Strategia*, 2005: 31) are used not only by the inhabitants of the town, but also its Sunday visitors. Within a walking distance from the centre of the city there are still meadows and cornfields with lungwort, cornflowers and poppies. The protection and cultivation of this unique eco-system and landscape heritage has been identified as one of the priorities in the local policy-making and listed among four chief strategic goals in The Strategy of the Sustainable Development of Podkowa Leśna Garden City for the Years 2005-2014.

The Strategy of the Sustainable Development of Podkowa Leśna Garden City for the Years 2005-2014

In 2004 on the initiative of the city council the Report on the State of Podkowa Leśna was issued with a view of providing the basis for the elaboration of the strategy for the future development of the garden city. The Report intended to “offer an accurate, precise and shared picture of Podkowa Leśna today” and, as its authors declared, “to engage as many inhabitants as possible” into the discussion thereof (*Raport*, 2004: 8). The fifteen main sections of the document featured respectively characteristics of natural environment and resources, analysis of demographic and social trends, presentation of the labour market, discussion of family issues and of situation of young people, as well as an overview of education, culture and arts, historic heritage, public service and facilities, health, enterprise, safety, local administration, and NGOs, with a special note on the community dialogue (*Raport*, 2004: 118). On the basis of the Report and in the course of several months of public consultation and review, The Strategy of the Sustainable Development was accepted in 2005. The chief strategic goal was defined as “implementation of the conception of a garden city in the 21st century in accordance with principles of sustainable development” and four major objectives were outlined as: “1. Modern community infrastructure (employing pro-ecological technologies); 2. The protection of the natural environment and the urban layout of the historical garden city; 3. Many-directional social development of the inhabitants of the garden city; 4. The development of post-industrial local enterprise” (*Strategia*, 2005: 70). The priority tasks identified for the first two objectives included the modernisation of streets and municipally owned buildings, the protection of the Młochowski Forest and the conservation of a historical Aleja Lipowa (over a century old avenue of lime trees planted with *Tilia cordata*), revitalisation of the City Park, the protection of clean air and local fauna and flora. In the area of public realm and community life, cultivation of the values of civic society, high quality education and culture, increasing standards of health and safety, and social integration and solidarity were given priority (*Strategia*, 2005: 75). The authors emphasized necessity to foster local democracy, based on the model of active participation („rather than passive presence, dominant in Poland”) and to preserve local cultural heritage, and strengthen the sense of place, its traditions and identity. They also drew attention to the fact that 30 % of the city’s residents settled down in Podkowa Leśna after 1989 and therefore viewed it desirable that they would develop the sense of attachment to the place, its past and traditions (*Strategia*, 2005: 76). The development of ecologically conscious enterprise, based on knowledge and expertise, the provision of a wide range of local services for the inhabitants, and development of tourism were listed as the priority tasks for the implementation of the fourth objective (*Strategia*, 2005: 80).

Some challenges of the policy of sustainable development versus garden city liveability

The Strategy of Sustainable Development, however, also revealed a difference of opinion and priorities concerning the protection of natural environment. The attitudes were at variance whether within the limits of a local budget public expenditure should go first on saving the historical avenue of lime-trees or on the modernisation of the roads, some of which are still in a poor condition. Priorities were also differently identified in debates about the proposed revitalisation of the City Park, which envisaged its transformation into a lively social space. The project was opposed by one of local NGOs on grounds that it might pose a threat to birds that have their breeding nests in the park. Among other concerns voiced was that of the needs of young people who seek more dynamic opportunities, not necessarily compatible with those of middle-aged or elderly inhabitants of the town (Mantey, 2011: 32). Last, but not least, a sensitive issue of the responsibility for the historic fabric of the garden city, which is part and parcel of its unique architectural heritage and identity, has surfaced. The proper maintenance of this heritage rests in the hands of private owners, whose actions range from uninformed damage, through a variety of alterations, to respectful restoration, sensitive to old detail and the spirit of the place.

The above examples of conflicting needs and perceptions, also touch upon the question of the liveability of the place which can be at odds with the policy of sustainable development. Unlike sustainability which is about the “three Es” of the environment, the economy and equity in the society (Knox, Mayer, 2009: 24-25), liveability “is about how easy a place is to use and how safe it feels. It is about creating – and maintaining – a sense of place by creating an environment that is both inviting and enjoyable” (ODPM, 2006: 156). The concept itself is a relatively new tool to address the question of synergies between objectively defined attributes of the quality of a living area and their perception as such by its inhabitants (Knox, Mayer, 2009: 24-27). The authors of the *State of the English Cities* report have grouped “desirable liveability indicators” into four main categories: environmental quality, physical place and functional place quality, and safety (ODPM, 2006: 164). Though liveability and sustainability can be expected to overlap, they do not necessarily do, as the above examples demonstrate. Liveability, which is also described as “a softer area of governmental policy, and one where perceptions are crucial” (ODPM, 2006: 164) touches upon the subjective sets of values and its relative value for different groups is one of the challenges to be faced by the local council and authorities.

Conclusions

Howard’s idea of a garden city was a pioneering attempt at the articulation of the issues that should be addressed to make a city a good place to live. His tying together of social, economic and environmental concerns in a holistic urban vision can be found convergent with 21st century considerations of sustainable development and standards of liveability. Today, when the expectations and demands of inhabitants of towns and cities are defined in favour of an improved quality of life, more leisurely pace of living and the contact with nature (ODPM, 2006: 157), the garden cities, inhabited by relatively small, ideally economically self-sustained and closely-knit communities, enjoying the benefits of green spaces, with diversified local social life and culture, seem to have an “inborn” potential of liveability. As the aforementioned findings of the 2011 Survey have shown this is true of Podkowa Leśna. It also appears that within a *counterurbanisation* trend, a selective movement of jobs and households to small towns, in operation in the West since the late 20th century (Knox, Mayer, 2009: 12), garden cities offer a viable and well tested small town alternative. Their ecological and social potential makes them suitable candidates to adopt the Slow philosophy, which originated in the late 1990s in association with Slow Food Movement, both promoting local and traditional cultures. The Cittaslow (Slow City) movement has grown to include over seventy towns from European

countries, becoming an ideological platform for networks of small towns and for “the grassroots implementation of the principles associated with liveability, quality of life, and sustainability” (Knox, Mayer, 2009: 43-44).

To sum up the above discussion there are at least three major recommendations concerning liveability in a garden city that can be drawn on the basis of Podkowa Leśna experience and they are the lesson of nature, the lesson of community and the lesson of heritage. The open and green spaces in the garden city provide a well tested landscaping pattern that can be adopted by planners both for new developments and for regeneration of older ones. Though, in economic terms, it may initially appear more costly to make such substantial spatial provisions, the ultimate gains – social, environmental, and in the end also economic, in terms of increased land value – are higher and beneficial for a community. As the 2011 Survey has shown those areas play an important role as places of encounter, cementing the sense of neighbourhood and their impact translates itself into the increased desirability of the place. Moreover, the reported place loyalty in Podkowa Leśna (the prevalent majority of the residents would not move out of the town) is not least related to its green spaces and nature preserves (Mantey, 2011: 13, 22). Secondly, the civic spirit and the residents’ self-sufficiency to organise vibrant social and cultural life through local initiative help to sustain the identity of a place, understood as a socio-spatial phenomenon. According to the evidence of environmental psychology, the emotional link with one’s place of living is likely to contribute to the psychological well-being and involvement in local activities (Florek, 2011: 347) and thus, in the long run, it helps avoid a sense social alienation and solitude, endemic in big conurbations. Finally, the least tangible perhaps, is the lesson of landscape and cultural heritage. As the case of Podkowa Leśna shows the richness and vitality of this heritage depends not less on its constant cultivation and contribution to what has been already given. The interest in local history, the activity of local societies, the initiative, imagination and spirit of creativity and enterprise of the residents are prerequisite for their maintenance of the sense of the place and rootedness. With a hindsight of over a century it seems plausible to contend that environmental, social and cultural heritage of garden cities provides a firm basis for their future development along the lines of sustainable growth and shaping life-enhancing spaces, and that they offer an inspiring lesson of planning and management, whose relevance should not be overlooked.

Kopsavilkums. *Pirmās dārzu pilsētas 20. gadsimta sākumā tika izveidotas, lai piedāvātu videi draudzīgu alternatīvu iepretim pārslogotajām pilsētām. Tās bija maza blīvuma ēkas, kas atradās ar zaļumiem klātās teritorijās. Tās bija sabiedrībai atvērtas un te tika ierīkotas arī kultūras un izglītības iestādes. Interesanti, ka dārzu pilsētas prioritātes šodien atklāj mūsdienīgas un ilgtspējīgas plānošanas jautājumus. Tādējādi raksts aktualizē dārzu pilsētas modeļa ekoloģisko un sociālo potenciālu, izvērtējot tās lomu šodienas debatē par dzīvotspējas risinājumiem. Raksta praktiskā daļa ir balstīta pētījumā par dārzu pilsētu Podkowa Leśna Polijā. Pamatjautājumi, kas tiek aktualizēti, ir apzaļumoto teritoriju mantojums un sabiedrības vērtību mantojums, kas saistīts ar vēsturiskajām dārzu pilsētām.*

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