EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC SPACES IN HISTORIC SMALL TOWN CENTRES OF WARMIA AND POWIŚLE

ABSTRACT

Towns represent an important element in the structure of Poland and provide a settlement framework underlying the development of medium-sized and large cities. Small-sized urban settlements have become a permanent part of the country's history, represent cultural continuity, and are transmitters of tradition. They perform not only local functions since their exogenous, specialised properties have an effect on the immediate surroundings and constantly shape them. The potential of towns lies especially in their historically shaped heritage centres filled with public spaces. The history of urban life, as well as the entire genetic code of the town, are contained in public spaces. They are an integral part of the urban fabric and shape the urban space. They fundamentally affect the quality of life and the level of inhabitants' well-being. Their role in the proper development of towns and cities is growing, so there is an increasing need to assess them. Even though the quality of public spaces is a subjective component of assessment, this does not mean that it cannot be assessed.

The insufficient number of studies concerning towns (including those from the Warmia and Mazury region), the complex research issues of historically shaped, specially protected, central urban spaces, and the specific determinants of public spaces inspired the authors to pursue this research topic. The main research objective was to develop the methodology for determining the quality of public spaces in the historical town centres of the Warmia and Powiśle regions. The research objective was achieved based on a method for assessing the quality of public spaces that took into account the components affecting both the quality and shape of spaces and the quality of life of inhabitants of the areas concerned. It was assumed that the designed method would achieve the set objective thanks to its simplicity and usability. In the assessment process in question, quality should be understood as the scaling of the properties of space. The main objective was achieved based on a number of specific goals: verification of the condition of the development of spaces of historical centres; the development of a method for delimitation of a historical centre; classification of public spaces; development of a method for assessing the quality of public spaces of historical centres of towns and development of a questionnaire for assessing the quality of public spaces.

For the study, public spaces being part of the historical centres of five towns located in the regions of Warmia and Powiśle, i.e. Reszel, Morąg, Pasłęk, Orneta, and Lidzbark

Warmiński, were selected. The study was conducted based on the following research scheme: I. designation of the study area; II. development of a table for assessing the quality of public spaces; III. assessment of the quality of public spaces; IV. development of a questionnaire survey for assessing the quality of public spaces; V. carrying out the questionnaire survey; VI. development of an application for assessing the quality of public spaces. The study applied two research methods. The first method is a table of assessment of the quality of public spaces based on a semantic differential. The scaling of ownership (defined as an assessment of quality) is carried out by means of assessing 46 components for each designated public space. The components were grouped into five subtypes of spatial order. The second method is a diagnostic survey based on a designed questionnaire for the assessment of public spaces (comprising 20 questions) and the associated subjective opinions. The respondents were a group of 500 people living in the towns under study (100 people from each town).

The proposed methodology for determining the quality of public spaces was tested on selected public spaces. The results obtained were juxtaposed with the results of questionnaire surveys. The results obtained are convergent at a general level, i.e. the level of the average quality of all public spaces in a particular town centre, and at a level of particular types of public spaces. The convergence of ratings is lower at the detailed level when selecting the best and the worst spaces. The results correlate with the quality of life indicated by the respondents, i.e. inhabitants of the regions under study.

Based on the methodology developed, a tool for assessing the quality of public spaces, i.e. an Internet application, was also developed. This versatile tool offers a practical design and serves multiple purposes. It is not only extensively utilized for assessing the value of public spaces and scaling town centre ownership, but it also serves as a valuable component in participatory budgeting and renovation programs.

Keywords: towns, historically shaped town centre, public spaces, ownership of public space, semantic differential, assessment of public space quality