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THE INTERWAR SPA RESORT WISŁA – THE DEGREE  
OF CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT PRESERVATIONMIĘDZYWOJENNE UZDROWISKO WISŁA –  
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## Abstract

The aim of the article is to present and highlight the cultural heritage of Wisła as an example of an interwar spa resort designed from scratch, which in the contemporary times has been to a large extent destroyed. The urban principles and the construction projects realized in result of the regulation plans of the 20s and 30s of the 20th century created a coherent concept of the town's growth based on spatial order and harmony with the natural environment, a concept which was consistently executed. The Author emphasizes that at present, owing to erroneous planning decisions, the proportions between the developed areas and the natural environment have been distorted, and the stylistic uniformity of buildings has been disfigured in the process of their modernization.

*Keywords: holiday resort, regulation plans, cultural heritage*

## Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na dziedzictwo kulturowe Wisły, jako przykładu projektowanego od podstaw międzywojennego uzdrowiska, które w czasach współczesnych uległo znacznej destrukcji. Założenia urbanistyczne i realizacje budowlane powstałe w efekcie planów regulacyjnych z lat 20. i 30. XX wieku stworzyły spójną koncepcję rozwoju miasta opartą na ładzie przestrzennym oraz harmonii ze środowiskiem przyrodniczym i konsekwentnie były egzekwowane. Autorka podkreśla, że obecnie w wyniku nieprawidłowych decyzji planistycznych zniekształcone zostały proporcje między terenami zabudowanymi i środowiskiem naturalnym a poprzez modernizację obiektów zaburzono ich jednorodność stylistyczną.

*Słowa kluczowe: miejscowość wypoczynkowa, plany regulacyjne, dziedzictwo kulturowe*

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## 1. Wisła's geographic location

The town of Wisła<sup>1</sup> is situated in the Silesian Beskids in the Western Carpathians at the origins of the greatest Polish river – the Vistula. It has the reputation of a tourist and recreational resort, and first of all of a winter sports centre. Wisła lies in the direct vicinity of the border with the Czech Republic and approximately 15 km away from the border with the Slovak Republic. It is surrounded by mountains from all sides. The natural border from the west is the mountain ridge of Wielka Czantoria */the Great Czantoria/* (995 mamsl), from the south – Stożek Mały */the Small Stożek/* and Wielki */the Great Stożek/* (978 mamsl) as well as the Kubalonka Pass, from the east – the main ridge of the Silesian Beskids and Barania Góra */the Barania Mount/* (1220 mamsl) and from the north – the Malinowaridge (115 mamsl). The town area encompasses several valleys of the Vistula river in its initial course as well as of all its tributaries, and it is therefore cut through by numerous watercourses<sup>2</sup>. It is a really extensive town and comprises nearly 40 hamlets constituting settlement concentrations whose names are derived from the names of the streams flowing through the area they occupy.

There are 11.403 residents in the Wisła commune<sup>3</sup>. The area of the town equals 11.091 ha, the greatest part of which is covered by forest stretching over 8.250 ha, which accounts for 74.4% of the total area. The arable land comprises 1.115 ha, i.e. 18.9%, and the developed area – 293 ha, which accounts for 2.6% of the town area.

## 2. Development of Wisła as a holiday resort

Although at present, Wisła does not have the status of a spa resort, its splendid location in the vicinity of a spruce forest and its moderately warm climate with a high humidity level provide health benefits which are excellent for people recovering from heart or respiratory system diseases as well as from conditions of nervous exhaustion. Over 70% of the town area is covered by forest, which until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was composed of beech and pine, but at present is a spruce monoculture.

Wisła, situated in the area of the historic Cieszyn Silesia, as a ducal village it was linked to the court in Cieszyn. The emergence of Wisła as an administrative unit dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1643, when, upon the orders of duchess Elżbieta Lukrecja / *Elisabeth Lucretia*<sup>4</sup>, it was recorded in the urbarium<sup>5</sup> as ‘a New Village established on the Vistulas’.

As a tourist destination, Wisła had remained unknown until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when the area started to attract travelling scientists discovering the origins of the Vistula river and describing their expeditions in the press and magazines. In 1885, ‘Tygodnik Ilustrowany’

<sup>1</sup> Wisła was granted municipal rights in 1962.

<sup>2</sup> The most important streams are: from the west – Gahura, Jawornik, Dziechcinka, Łabajów; and from the east – Bukowa, Partecznik, Gościejów and Malinka.

<sup>3</sup> The data come from the Wisła Town Hall and are as of the 31st Dec. 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Elżbieta Lukrecja – the last duchess of Cieszyn from the Piast dynasty – died in 1653 and then the Duchy of Cieszyn was taken over by the Habsburgs, who were its rulers until 1848.

<sup>5</sup> A book containing a register of a land owner's property as well as the duties of his serfs.

(*The Illustrated Weekly*) published an article by the ethnographer and social activist, Bogumił Hoff, entitled 'A Trip to the Origins of the Vistula'. The author of the article, enchanted by the beauty of the Wisła area, became a discoverer and propagator of its tourist merits. His activities triggered a discernible increase of interest in this hitherto unknown place among the inhabitants of big cities, such as Cracow, Lwów, Poznań or Warsaw. In 1886, Bogumił Hoff built the first Polish villa 'Warszawa', and a year later another one – 'Jasna'. Promotion of Wisła as a Polish holiday resort, initiated by Bogumił Hoff, was continued by his son, Bogdan Hoff, who was the author of design as well as the constructor of the first villas, and also the founder of the natural therapy centre<sup>6</sup> and a bathhouse<sup>7</sup>, which operated until 1915 when they were destroyed by flood. Another propagator of Wisła and the holiday resort creator was the man of letters, psychologist and philosopher, Julian Ochorowicz, who together with Bogdan Hoff, built a number of wooden villas such as 'Zofiówka' (*Sophie's Place*), 'Placówka' (*the Establishment*), 'Maja', 'Jaskółka' (*Swallow*) and 'Sokół' (*Falcon*). They were two-storey buildings, with the elevated central part crowned with a balcony over the entrance and, of course, with a shingle roof. Larger villas were built on stone bases and had towers with terraces to admire the views. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the 'golden' era for Wisła, which, owing to Julian Ochorowicz's<sup>8</sup> social activity and development of cultural life, was visited by well-known literary personae, such as Władysław Stanisław Reymont, Maria Konopnicka and Bolesław Prus.

Villa Bożydar built by Bogumił Hoff in 1895, became a canon for wooden villa construction forms in the area of Wisła. It was a two-storey wooden villa of log wall structure, seated on a high stone base tapering upwards. The base had arcades creating a sort of covered space, and the upper one-storey part with a balcony and an attic was set forward projecting beyond the ground floor of the building. The design of the villa was inspired by elements of traditional construction methods used in the area of Wisła, which include: the stone base; log wall structure; gable roof covered with shingle; open porches; decorative lining boards at the gables. The style used in villa Bożydar is defined as the 'Wisła style' and houses inspired by this style are still built at present. This testifies to the large popularity of the style promoted by Hoff with the local community. Nevertheless, in the interwar period, masonry guesthouses of modernist forms were also built, and their style was a combination of functionalism and the local Wisła style, which gave them the characteristic stone bases with arcades.

### 3. Interwar regulation plans

At the turn of the 20s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Silesian Voivodeship Office initiated a programme of extension and modernization of Silesian spa and holiday resorts in an endeavour to attract Polish tourists and health visitors, who were more inclined to go to foreign, more modern spa resorts. General and specific regulation plans were prepared, which were to introduce some order into the chaotic and unplanned development. New arteries

<sup>6</sup> The establishment was located in hotel "Luisenhof" (later the name was changed to "Hotel Piast"), bought and redecored by Bogdan Hoff in 1903.

<sup>7</sup> The bathhouse was opened in 1906 in a building converted from a former stable.

<sup>8</sup> In 1905 Julian Ochorowicz established the Association of Wisła Enthusiasts.

and streets were marked out and parcels of land were allocated for future squares, market places, parks and promenades. Spa zones were delimited and separated from economic and industrial zones. The works were undertaken in Ustroń, Istebna, Jaworze, Jastrzębie-Zdrój and Wisła, and they pertained not only to the realization of the architectural and urban vision, but also included building a railway line, water supply and sewage systems. The spa infrastructure extension attracted private investors who built new guesthouses, hotels and service outlets, thus improving the residents' quality of living. The plans provided for a place for Wisła town centre, which was to be situated in the most accessible area, in the river valley sheltered from northern winds by the mountains. The problem of regulating the Vistula river emerged immediately, as it flooded the valley extensively at springtime. The authors of the plan tried to avoid the unplanned and uncontrolled development, which was a commonplace problem in other Carpathian spa resorts. A post of a commissioner was established – an official whose job was to execute all the building operations in compliance with the regulation plan<sup>9</sup>.

The most important investment projects carried out by the Voivodeship Office in Wisła in the 30s are:

- regulation of the Vistula river,
- building the water supply system and electrification,
- building the Ustroń Polana – Wisła Głębcze railway line,
- building two state schools,
- building the President's Castle at Zadni Groń<sup>10</sup>,
- building the Therapy and Education Centre at Kubalonka in Istebna<sup>11</sup>,
- building the swimming pool and the bathing park complex<sup>12</sup>,
- building the Spa Hall and the Town Hall seat,
- building the spa park,
- building the ski jumps in Łabajów, Malinka and on the slope of the Barania Góra.

The above projects had a significant influence on the spa resort growth and they stimulated construction projects of private investors, which in consequence made Wisła a fashionable spa resort.

The regulation plans produced a town centre that was a clearly defined public space in the form of a square open towards the park. In the 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the square was a geometric garden composed of four sections cut across by alleys and a central piece.

<sup>9</sup> By executing the regulation plan, the authorities exerted influence on the choice of such architectural forms that would not infringe upon the landscape quality.

<sup>10</sup> The Castle of the President of the Republic (1929–1930), authored by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, is an exquisite work of architecture designed in the style of Polish modernism and with the use of the cutting-edge construction technologies of the turn of the 20s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The structure was made of reinforced concrete and brick, and clad with Istebna sandstone and artificial stone.

<sup>11</sup> The Therapy and Education Centre (1931–1937) built according to the design selected by way of a contest (arch. Jadwiga Dobrzyńska and arch. Zygmunt Łoboda) is situated at the height of 750 m amsl on the southern slopes of the Kubalonka Pass and occupies 8 ha of land. It is a complex of 8 buildings, which could provide treatment for 400 children.

<sup>12</sup> The bathing park was built on the right bank of the Vistula river, at the forks of the Parecznik stream. The complex comprises a swimming pool (50 × 50 m), a changing rooms pavilion, a café, locker rooms for hockey players (in the winter it had the function of an ice rink), 3 tennis courts, a park and a beach.

The Wisła park is a stripe of greenery with strolling alleys occupying the left bank of the Vistula and connecting the centre with the swimming pool complex. The park was designed to blend in with the surrounding landscape, and its viewing axes are directed at the peaks of the neighbouring mountains. Together with the modernist development, it made complete the urban planning concept of the spa resort's main public space, complementing it on the north-south axis along the Vistula river. The main square was surrounded by two wings of the Office building and the Spa Hall, with its viewing axis directed towards the domineering body of the Evangelical church. The square offers far-reaching views over the panorama of the mountains, and its large area highlights the architectural objects which co-create this space.

Strict observance of the regulation plans by private investors and local authorities, but also inspection of the already formally approved designs, resulted in the emergence of a coherent architectural and urban concept of Wisła's growth. The concept was fully adjusted to the land conditions as well as to the requirements of environmental and greenery conservation. The concern for spatial order is evident in the 'Local Statute on the preservation of the aesthetic appearance of Wisła spa resort' of the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1935, approved by the Silesian Voivodeship Council, where the heights of development, type of roofs and positioning of buildings were precisely determined. Some of the paragraphs read as follows: "... The Commune Office will not grant permission for execution of a structure the appearance of which would blemish the spa resort. Considering the mountainous character of the landscape, it is unacceptable to build curb (mansard) roofs ... as well as to cover roofs with asbestos sheets or roof tiles ...in colours arousing doubt as to the possibility of blemishing the spa resort..."<sup>13</sup>. As emphasized by engineer S. Tworowski<sup>14</sup>, a distinguished urban planner in service of Wisła and Ustroń during the interwar years, the author of *inter alia* the Spa Hall, the mountainous landscape required roofs of greater slope or of a horizontal line, the development should be composed with intervals giving views into the landscape, the maximum height of development should be determined and tourist roads were to be objects in their own right rather than built up on both sides.

The construction boom in the 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced in effect approximately 160 new villas and guesthouses, which could accommodate 4,000 guests. The objects were scattered in the valleys and on mountain slopes, blended in with the surroundings, and they did not form a massive development.

There were two types of villas and guesthouses in Wisła in the interwar period. The first group comprises wooden villas built along the Hoff-like pattern, i.e. one or two storeys high with high attics, of log wall structure, covered with pitched shingle or tin roofs and seated on high stone bases with arcades. The other group are modernist masonry villas and guesthouses – three or four-storey asymmetrical buildings with semi-circular or rectangular avant-corps projections, flat roofs and stone cladding in the basement.

<sup>13</sup> After: *Od wsi do uzdrowiska. Dziedzictwo architektoniczne Wisły*, Materials for a monograph of Wisła, Wisła 2009.

<sup>14</sup> S. Tworowski, *Architektura w krajobrazie Beskidów*, [in:] *Architektura i Budownictwo*, Year XII (1936), No. 4.

#### 4. The present condition of the town development

The rich architectural heritage of the interwar Wisła is not clearly visible at present, or it could even be said that it has been wasted. Numerous modernist villas and guesthouses of historic value have been destroyed. Conservation activities have been allowed to stop, and essential stylistic features have been lost as a result of redecoration works. Owing to the regulation principles and the interwar construction projects, Wisła received some pro-growth stimuli, from which it has benefited at present, yet it has lost its identity and the climate of a coherent spatial expression. It could be stated that its stylistic uniformity has been destroyed, and the urban layout disfigured. The harmonious arrangement and proportions between built-up and green areas have been disrupted. The mountain slopes have been drastically developed – overloaded with objects of random scale and form. I would like to mention the district of Partecznik here, where the valley is dominated by a towering complex of six large cubic volume hotels for organized groups of holidaymakers. Right at the entrance into the town centre, opposite the bus station, on the slope of Czerhła, sits the enormous building of the *Golębiewski Hotel* with 562 rooms.

The designed development should be discreetly blended with the existing fabric of important historic and aesthetic values. Objects of high artistic class – forgotten, neglected and often disfigured by modernization and rebuilding, do not promote the awareness of the significance and unique character of the spa resort in the interwar period. It is very important for preserving these values that institutions responsible for monument conservation should cooperate with the local authorities. A considerable number of valuable villas and guesthouses are not listed in the historic monuments register, which means that they still face a significant hazard of being further destroyed or modernized in an ill-considered way.

There are 7 (seven) objects listed in the historic monuments register run by the Voivodeship National Monuments Conservation Office in Katowice (Local office in Bielsko-Biała). They are:

- the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession church from 1838 (since 1978),
- the former Evangelical school from 1824 (since 1978),
- the building of the Evangelical parsonage 1805–1807 (since 1978),
- the building of a former inn, at present the seat of the Beskid Museum, from 1794 (since 1987),
- the former Habsburgs' hunting lodge from 1897, transferred from Przysłop, at present the seat of the PTTK /*Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society*/ (since 1986),
- a wooden residential building from 1909 (since 1987),
- The Polish Republic President's Manor "the Castle" at ZadniGroń 1929–1931 (since 1994).

It is worth mentioning that at the Register of historic monuments at the Historic Monuments Conservation Office, there is information that the area of Wisła contains 207 valuable objects of architecture.

13 Local Land Use Plans were passed in 2012, which together cover the area of 495.8 ha. These are:

- Wisła Partecznik – Kamienny – hotels for organized groups of holidaymakers, guesthouses, sports and recreation areas, and supplements of the residential and commercial development (area of 24.8 ha),





III. 1. Hotel 'Ognisko' from the interwar spa resort



III. 2. 'Gołębiewski' from the contemporary time



III. 3. The Market Square of Wisła



III. 4. The picturesque views of hills from the market square





III. 5. The view of the monumental church situated in the market square



III. 6. The drawing of the old boarding-house 'Koliba'

- Wisła Centrum – Sokolity – construction projects in the town centre, building of a new sports and recreation complex (area of 137 ha),
- Wisła – Oblaziec – residential and commercial development (area of 9.3 ha),
- Wisła – Malinka – Cieńków – development of a ski centre (area of 44.4 ha),
- Wisła – Malinka – Zieleńska Polana – residential development and transportation links (area of 7.8 ha),
- Wisła – Jawornik – Ropienki – modernization of a sports and recreation complex (area of 4.9 ha),
- Wisła – Kubalonka – development of cross-country skiing and biathlon (area of 62.6 ha),
- Wisła – Jawornik – Cieślarów – residential development (area of 5.9 ha),
- Wisła – Malinka – Rówień – Sports and Recreation Centre (area of 135.3 ha),
- Wisła – ‘Silany II’ – a ski centre (area of 11.8 ha),
- Wisła – Czarne I – residential and commercial development (area of 17.5 ha),
- Wisła – Czarne II – residential development, hotels for organized groups of holidaymakers and guesthouses (area of 18.5 ha),
- Wisła – Silany – Ochorowicza – modernization of the public road network and residential and commercial development (area of 16 ha).

The land covered by the recently passed plans encompasses nearly 500 hectares of the commune area, nearly 400 hectares of which have been allocated for extension of ski centres and sports & recreation centres. The remaining part has been allocated for developing the organized holiday and guesthouse accommodation infrastructure as well as supplementing the residential and commercial development.

Discussing the issue of land use and spatial order, we should emphasize that the regulation of Wisła’s watercourses carried out in recent years has contributed to the town’s protection against flooding as well as to the development of the recreational function. New walkways and cycling routes have appeared along the Vistula riverbanks. The embankments with stairs give better access to water, and the weirs are used as places for bathing on hot summer days.

The indisputably huge cultural heritage of Wisła, designed from scratch in the pre-war years in compliance with a specifically defined urban concept, requires respect and protection so that the historic value of the place characterized by the specific atmosphere of the past could be duly emphasized. I do hope that the recently passed land use plans will respect the identity and climate of the place.

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