

A typology of rural public places, on examples from Eastern Poland

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Abstract. The paper proposes a typology of rural public places currently functioning in the social life of villages that indicates how this system is distinct from the public space of cities or even suburban villages. The research was conducted using the method of interviews in 21 villages in eastern Poland. The result of the analyses is a typology that includes eight basic types of rural public places: Multifunctional village squares; Grocery surroundings; Other service facilities surroundings; Sacred sites; Village streets; Neighborhood space; Recreational places; Semi-natural places. Most of them are unintentionally created places. The research shows that multifunctional places – both central and typically recreational – are crucial for rural areas, while semi-natural places are the most characteristic. However, due to the specific character of the rural landscape and rural community, we did not find any basis for distinguishing a separate category including arranged greenery, representative places or club spaces.

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1. Introduction

What are typologies of public spaces needed for? Does systematizing them make practical sense or is it just a theoretical scientific consideration? When we started work on this article, we had two main ideas. First, the development of a typology organizes knowledge about a given phenomenon, favors better navigation within the subject matter and allows easier tracking of its regional or temporal diversity. Secondly, characterizing individual types of places can reveal very specific, practical guidelines regarding the design, maintenance and management of rural space.

The existing typologies of public spaces created over the last few decades tell a lot about the transformations of both the places themselves and the way they are perceived. These typologies, however, are primarily concerned with cities, just like most of the discussion concerning other aspects related to the functioning of common space. Meanwhile, as J. Bański (2011) writes, the countryside, despite the progressing processes blurring the differences, is still significantly different from the city and, excluding suburban areas, requires a different way of looking at the space and the community that inhabits it. M. Kowicki (2011) strongly emphasizes the value of such a bipolar settlement system with a real city and real countryside, regretting at the same time that we still do not appreciate the values of rural areas and are not able to protect them. Awareness of these differences and the specificity of rural public space emphasized by various authors (Niedźwiecka-Filipiak, 2006; Górka, 2012; 2016; Szkaradkiewicz et al., 2014; Micek & Staszewska, 2019; Soszyński et al., 2022) suggests that, so too, the typology of rural public places (RPP) should differ from the one drawn up on the basis of urban or suburban areas.

Fortunately, in recent years, research on RPP has been increasing in popularity, especially among Polish researchers. However, most of the classifications concerning typically rural areas were not the result of research and detailed analysis – most authors created them intuitively and rather incidentally for the purposes of a given article. There is no typology of public places dedicated specifically to rural areas that has been developed on the basis of social research of the local community – i.e., users of this space. Therefore, numerous detailed studies are being developed, but there is no typology that could form the basis of such studies.

Kazimierz Wejher (1993) argued that no typology of public spaces will completely reflect their diversity. Thus, our aim is not to present

a completely exhaustive list of possible public places found in the countryside. We would rather point out the most important (in a social sense) types of public places actually functioning in the social life of the countryside, indicating at the same time the distinctness of the rural system of public spaces from similar systems functioning in the city or even in a suburban village. We want this typology to derive directly from the social functioning of a place, not from how a place is perceived by an external expert observer.

Our next specific objective is to verify the criteria used to divide the RPP and to identify any other criteria relevant to the functioning of the rural space.

Finally, we would like to create a characterization of the different types of places (with their strengths and weaknesses) so that it can provide important practical guidance for the creation and management of public places.

2. Literature review

An attempt to develop a typology must begin with the development of a set of criteria by which the different types of places will be distinguished. When dividing public spaces, morpho-functional criteria are most often used (Carr et al., 1992; Januchta-Szostak, 2011; Nochian et al., 2015) but over time researchers have also introduced new criteria that more comprehensively reflect the diversity of places. These included perception and ownership (Carmona, 2010) or accessibility (Bierwiazzonek et al., 2012). An even more extensive set of criteria was used by D. Mantey and A. Kępkowicz (2018) in their classification of public spaces in suburban areas. To the morpho-functional and accessibility factors, they added intended users and prevalent form of control, which again adapts existing typologies to new trends in public spaces. M. Szkaradkiewicz et al. (2014), also studying suburban villages, divided public spaces based on an unusual (but in their opinion very significant) criterion, which is the circumstances of the place's creation. Thus, they distinguished between places deliberately created with new suburban residents in mind; public spaces created earlier, with the needs of the residents of these villages at the time in mind; and places acting as public spaces unintentionally. The sense of such a separation is confirmed by the works of other authors (Przesmycka & Sosnowska, 2014; Soszyński et al., 2022) indicating that rural areas feature few planned and consciously designed public places.

In this publication, we have adapted the following criteria to the proposed typology: location; surroundings; spatial development and arrangement; main activities (social, recreational, economic); main user groups; and entity caring for the place. In our opinion, an important factor influencing the differentiation of public spaces is the immediate surroundings of the place or what are sometimes called “active edges” (Gehl, 1987) or simply “the neighborhood”. The last criterion is the least obvious. We abandoned the question of ownership or accessibility (Carmona, 2010; Bierwiazzonek et al., 2012), because our previous experience in Poland (Soszyński et al., 2018 & 2022) clearly showed that, in rural areas, more important than the official ownership and responsibility for the place is who actually takes care of the place and looks after it.

In addition to different criteria, the typologies of public spaces proposed by different authors differ significantly in the detail of the divisions. In relation to urban areas, we can for example find very synthetic divisions (Stanley et al., 2012; Bierwiazzonek et al., 2012) in which the authors distinguished seven types of places. But there are also very detailed ones (Carmona, 2010) in which we find as many as 20 types of spaces. In our deliberations on the typology of public spaces, we wanted to find a synthetic approach adapted to the specificity of rural areas. We therefore studied the few available studies on rural public spaces, in which the authors always had to deal with defining the basic types of places.

In most studies, apart from indicating the types of places, there is usually a designation of their significance. I. Niedźwiecka-Filipiak (2006) distinguishes *rural community centers and squares; sports fields; playgrounds; parks; waterside places and surroundings of rural shops*. She clearly stresses that the first type plays the most significant role for residents, while the last functions only in some cases. H. Leng and T. Li (2016), in addition to the already mentioned *squares, green areas and service facility surroundings, list streets and marketplaces*. J. Piyapong et al. (2019), apart from *commercial shops, transportation routes and the coast*, distinguish *shrines and spaces between homes*. Describing types of rural public places, A. Górka (2012) highlights an important and complex role fulfilled by *rural commons*, i.e., *meadows* belonging to the community, parish or individuals. These are places with little equipment (a bench, a pitch, a pond), which allows spontaneity in their use. The author points out that *playgrounds*, introduced artificially and in isolation from other common places, usually

remain deserted. She also mentions the crisis of a *rural street*, resulting from excessive orderliness, increased traffic and separation of pedestrian and car traffic. In many cases, residents no longer regard streets as common. The habit of taking care of the street in front of your house is disappearing, as well as the habit of meeting on the street. In the detailed classification of suburban villages, D. Mantey and A. Kępkowicz (2018) distinguish traditional places, such as a *bus stop* or a *space around symbolic objects and religious places*, used mainly by native inhabitants, along with new places, aimed mainly at migrant inhabitants – *recreational areas* (walking and cycling paths, green spaces, natural/semi-natural spaces) or *club spaces* intended exclusively for a certain group of people (cafés, horse stables, community centers). They noticed that for young people, however, *hidden places* without an owner are of particular importance. Similar observations are made by K. Kajdanek (2011), who underscores the problem of dividing suburban communities into not numerous users of traditional places and new residents, for whom these places are dispensable or not adjusted to their tastes and expectations. The author also points out, typical for suburbs, the disappearance of *semi-public space* (usually a garden between one's house and a street). Its great importance is emphasized by J. Gehl (1987), while A. Górka (2012) describes it as characteristic of the traditional Polish village.

As we end this chapter, we would like to clarify two concepts necessary for us to carry out a typology – these are: *place* and its *importance*. In our article we refer to *public places* rather than *public spaces*, even though the two terms are often used interchangeably in this topic. Our choice refers to the concept of Yi Fu Tuan (1987), who emphasized that a *place* is that part of space to which humans have given meaning through their activities and spiritual and cultural experiences. As far as the *importance* of places is concerned, it has been studied in very different ways. However, most authors agree that the primary indicator of the quality and attractiveness of public spaces is the presence of people (Gehl, 1987; Montgomery, 1998; Sinkiene et al., 2017). This presence can be defined as the vitality of a public place, i.e., the sum of all social activities and behaviors that cannot happen without the physical dimension of the space (Lynch, 1960; Montgomery, 1998; Wicher, 2010). The simplest way to measure vitality may therefore be to determine the *number of users*. However, as emphasized by J. Gehl (1987), it is not only the number of people that is important for the quality of space, but above all the *number of recreational*

activities (otherwise known as optional activities, which occur when there is a desire for them and when time and space allow) and *social activities* (depending on the presence of other people and consisting of passive and active contacts with other space users). This author, like many others (Whyte, 1980; Montgomery, 1998; Carmona et al., 2003), also emphasizes the importance of the *diversity of users* and the *diversity of activities*. A. Rumińska (2013), on the other hand, points to *visitability* (i.e., the ability to be visited associated with staying in a place) as a characteristic that constitutes the quintessence of public space. She refers to Yi Fu Tuan (1987), who writes that “Place is a pause in movement” and only “a stopover makes a given neighbourhood become a centre of importance”. To this list we should also add the *presence of strangers* – considered by some authors as a necessary feature of any public space (Gehl, 1987; Kohn, 2008). In our research we considered all these seven characteristics as qualities defining the vitality of a place and at the same time reflecting its importance.

3. Research materials and methods

For our research we chose an area in eastern Poland, in Lubelskie Voivodeship. The four villages where the main research was conducted were Spiczyn, Kijany, Zawieprzycze and Stoczek – we called them “base villages”. All of them are located in the

municipality of Spiczyn in the county of Łęczna. They are neighboring villages but differ from each other in rank, size and spatial layout. Another 17 villages where the supplementary survey was conducted are located in Łęczna, Włodawa and Parczew counties – we called them “supplementary villages”. The locations of all the analyzed villages are shown below (Fig. 1). According to the “Spatial Classification of Rural Areas in Poland” (Buciak & Pieniążek, 2012), the studied public spaces are located in municipalities classified as *agricultural*, *predominantly agricultural* and *forestry*. These are the most common types of villages in Poland. We have omitted the other types – that is, urbanized and partially urbanized. Some of the examined villages have additional characteristic features. In three villages, some of the inhabitants live in multi-family buildings – this is the result of the nationalization of agriculture carried out in communist countries. In many supplementary villages, the tourist function is significant.

The first stage of the research was conducted in the four base villages. It involved the identification and valorization of public places taking as a criterion the vitality of places. For this purpose, research was conducted using the interview method. Anonymous, semi-structured and focused interviews were used. Interviews were conducted in person at the interviewee's home or in public places. Interviews were conducted with people living in the village and knowing the village and its inhabitants well.

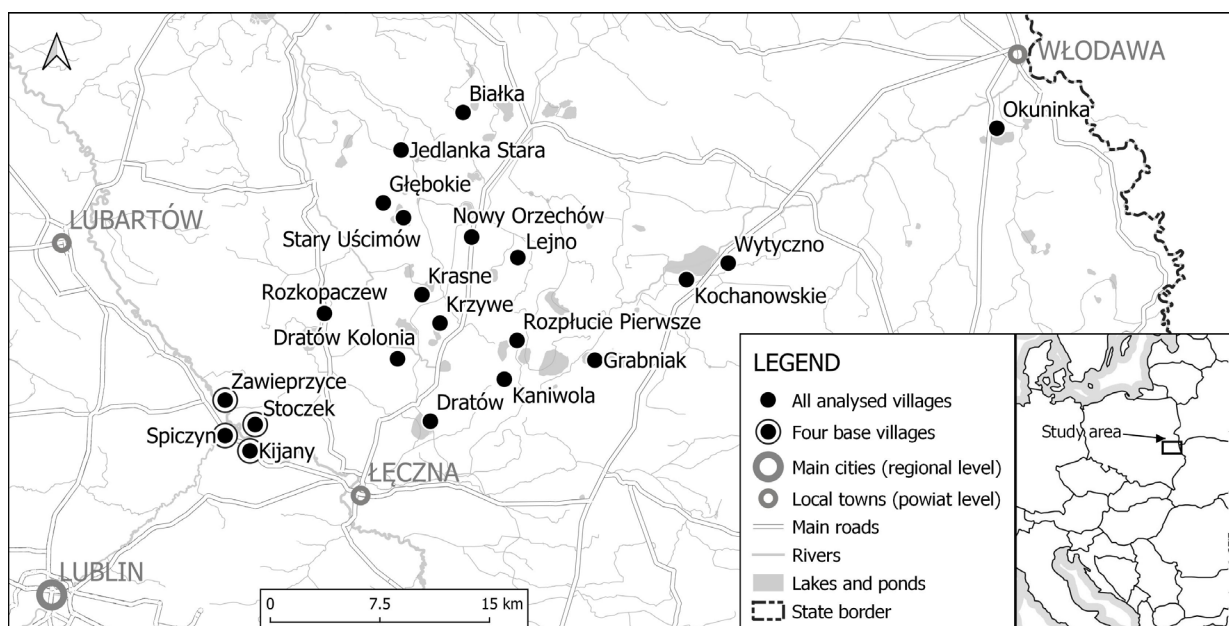


Fig. 1. Location of the analyzed villages

Source: author's own draft

Table 1. Selected demographic statistics of interviewees

Socio-economic variables	Classes (4 based villages)	Classes (17 supplementary villages)
Gender	males – 58%; females – 42%	males – 47%; females – 53%
Age	under 18 years – 12%; 19-35 years – 23%; 36-65 years – 42%; 66 years and over – 23%	under 18 years – 15%; 19-35 years – 24%; 36-65 years – 43%; 66 years and over – 18%
Educational status	primary education – 35%; secondary education – 39%; tertiary education – 26%	primary education – 23%; secondary education – 65%; tertiary education – 12%
Local community function/position	village head – 6%; saleswoman/man – 13%; employees of the rural institutions – 6%; local activists – 19%; others – 55%	village head – 14%; saleswoman/man – 16%; employees of the rural institutions – 15%; local activists – 10%; others – 45%

Source: author's own elaboration

The selection of people was based on interviews with the village leader and other key people in the village community (village head, librarian, shop assistant, activists, etc.). In total, 31 interviews were conducted during the summer of 2018. In each village, six to ten persons of different ages, genders and professions were interviewed (see Table 1). The questions asked in the interviews were open-ended but structured in such a way that the answers would allow the importance of the seven characteristics that make up the overall vitality of a place to be determined. The features analyzed were: Number of people and activities; Social activities; Recreational activities; Visitability; User diversity; Diversification of activities; Presence of strangers. (All features were discussed in the introduction.) In addition, thanks to the information obtained from the interviewees, it was possible to determine the general characteristics of the places (the way they are developed, the type of activities and users, the entity that takes care of the place, the opinions of the residents about specific places). These characteristics were complemented by a field visit, during which a description of the location, surroundings and development of each identified public place was made.

The descriptive assessments that the interviewees gave for each place were transformed into quantitative scores to achieve an overall importance for each public space on a scale from 1 (not very important) to 4 (very important). The importance was determined by taking into account all the features that make up the vitality of a place. This method was described in detail in our previous publication (Soszyński et al., 2022). However, such an assessment based on interviews should not be treated as an absolute valorization of places, but as an attempt to identify public places that play the most important role.

In the second stage of the work, based on the collected data (valorization and characterization of places), all the identified public spaces were categorized into types. The typology was created

based on six criteria: location; surroundings; state of development; main types of activity; main groups of users; entity taking care of the place.

In the third stage of the research, the typology obtained from the analyses carried out in the four base villages was applied to the 17 supplementary villages. The identification and valorization of public places were carried out in these villages based on 93 interviews conducted between 2012 and 2015, the results of which were partially published in 2018 (Soszyński et al., 2018). All the types were assigned to the public places identified in this research using the same criteria as for the four base villages. This allowed the preliminary results to be confronted with a larger sample of villages and to modify the proposed typology as well as the characteristics of individual types of public places.

4. Research results

As a result of the survey, 57 public places considered important by residents were identified in the four basic villages and a further 112 places were identified in the 17 supplementary villages. In total, the typology of rural public spaces presented below was developed on the basis of 169 places located within the boundaries of 21 villages.

Based on the six criteria discussed in the previous chapters, eight main types of rural public spaces were identified. The proposed typology is presented in Table 2 together with the designation criteria for each type defined for 57 places in the base villages. It should be noted that many places are mixed or transitional forms and the boundaries between these types are fluid. Despite this, in the vast majority of cases there are features or functions that are clearly dominant and allow places to be covered by one of the eight proposed types.

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In the following Table 3, we have presented a complete list of public spaces in basic and supplementary villages with the importance of each place. It allows us to assess the designated types of public places in terms of their prevalence and their importance to the local community.

Based on the information collected from all 21 villages, it was possible to provide a brief characteristics of the different types of rural public places as outlined below.

Multifunctional village squares. These are squares or plazas connected to service facilities, most often located in the central part of the village. They occur in only seven of the 21 analyzed villages. However, they are characterized by the highest vitality of all described types of places – despite the fact that in many analyzed villages they are very poorly developed (e.g., lack of any seating facilities). However, most have at least some elements of street furniture encouraging meeting or resting.

Table 2. Characteristics of the distinguished types of public places in four base villages

Characteristics Type of place	Number of places	Location: A-center; B-edge; C-outside built-up area	Surroundings: S-services; H-houses; N-nature	Integrative forms of development* 0-none; 1-few; 2-numerous	Main activities **	Main groups of users **	Entity taking care of the place
multifunctional village squares	3	A	S	1/2	brief conversations / long talks / seating / looking around	all groups	public
grocery surroundings	4	A	S	1	brief conversations / looking around / feasts / eating and drinking	all groups	private
other service facilities surroundings	9	A/B	S	0/2	brief conversations / feasts / special events / site-specific activities	children with parents / youth / seniors / interest groups	public / organization / private
sacred sites	6	A/B/C	S/H	1	prayers / long talks / brief conversations / special events	elderly women / adult women / children / seniors / adults	organization / group / informal
village streets	14	A/B	H	0	brief conversations / walks / jogging / children's games / cycling	all groups	public / informal
neighborhood spaces	1	B	H	2	brief conversations / long talks / children's games / looking around / walks	residents of blocks of flats / seniors / children / children with parents / adults	group / informal / public
recreational places	7	B/A	H/N	1/2	children's games / sports / walks / brief conversations / long talks / feasts / special events	youth / children / children with parents / young adults / seniors	public
semi-natural places	12	C/B	N	0/1	walks / feasts / fishing / looking around / swimming	youth / adult males	group / informal / private / public

* presence of development forms typical of public spaces and encouraging meeting and recreation, such as benches, gazebos, walkways, play-ground equipment, etc.

** bold type distinguishes clearly dominant groups

Source: author's own draft

commercial object, it is usually located in such a way as to serve as many inhabitants as possible – thanks to this, it is also an optimally located public place. It is usually situated in the center of the village and, in larger villages, in the center of some part of the village. The total number of shops in the surveyed villages exceeds the number of all other service facilities. Nevertheless, there are some small villages without a shop. A table with benches at the entrance to the shop or at its back is a typical arrangement of the surroundings of shops, although there are some shops that lack any seats. Almost all the spaces surrounding the shops (out of a total of 27 such spaces) were rated very highly by the residents in terms of the number of users and the social activities undertaken by different user groups. The *grocery surroundings* are typical everyday spaces with a predominance of necessary activities and short social activities – mainly fleeting conversations. However, their role is much more complex. A resident of Stoczek reported: “Sometimes I used to go to the shop just like that, to buy just anything – just to walk around, to chat. Now, if there is no shop, there is no point in going out.” The shop can therefore be a very important motive for leaving the house, the purpose of a walk, and therefore also an object that determines the vitality of the street. But there are big differences in the role of individual shops. In Zawieprzyce, the local shop located in the center of the village is an important meeting place for passersby but is dominated by alcoholic groups. In Spiczyn, on the other hand, the shop is the most important meeting place for very diverse groups of users, which is why one interviewee lamented that “there is nothing for drinkers in Spiczyn, you cannot drink anywhere – the police chase everywhere”. Perhaps this is because this shop is connected to other facilities in the center of the village, is well-maintained, and has benches and a pavement, encouraging people to stop. It is therefore attractive to all and difficult to be annexed by just one group. Kijany has one of the most frequented shops, but it is not linked to other services and does not form a clear village center. Interviewees emphasized that, other than the car park, there is no place to stop. As a result, despite its central location and high intensity of necessary activities, it is not a key public space of this village.

Other service facilities surroundings. This category includes facilities such as a school, fire station, health center, café, club spaces and others. These are places maintained by public institutions or private persons and sometimes organizations or associations. They are located very diversely, both in the center of the village (fire stations) and on the

outskirts or even outside the village (some schools, health centers and restaurants). They usually have some equipment typical of public places. Sometimes they are connected with recreational places – e.g., a playground. Other service facilities are fewer than shops. Their importance is also lower. Only in the case of schools did interviewees rate some relatively highly. Interestingly, facilities created as meeting places for the village community, such as a restaurant, fire station, community center or library, play a minor role. In some villages, fire stations were not even mentioned by the interviewees who were firefighters, pointing to other meeting places for this social group (usually private plots). On the other hand, in Stoczek, where there is no building for meetings, the inhabitants were very emotional about the need to build one. Generally, when writing about *other service facilities surroundings*, the most important features are high visitability and social activities. User diversity is usually underestimated, because these places are usually assigned to certain social groups like young people, seniors or interest groups. It is therefore difficult to define specific types of activities for these types of places, as they vary according to the type of facility and user group.

Sacred sites are places with a religious character – mainly temples, cemeteries and roadside shrines. However, this category can also include memorials, graves and other objects considered sacred by the inhabitants, sacred and visited for religious or meditative purposes. This does not apply, however, to the majority of rural monuments, which are admittedly symbolic objects but function more as part of the development of everyday or even recreational places. The distinctive feature of these places is the activity connected with prayer or meditation. The initial attempt to include *sacred sites* in the *other service facilities surroundings* could be justified in the case of temples, which are a specific type of service building. However, the presence and special role of shrines were decisive in our keeping this category separate. They play a less and less important role in village life but are still a very characteristic type of place created and maintained by the local community – usually in a grassroots manner. They are definitely not a service object, but a specific place for religious meetings, as well as meetings of a group of people involved in caring for these objects. Nowadays the tradition of celebrating religious services at shrines is maintained mainly by elderly women, sometimes women with children. *Sacred sites* are located in very different parts of the village as well as outside of it – however, they are usually junctions or significant places, such as crossroads, village entrances, hills,

bridge abutments, etc. Those that are important public places are usually accompanied by benches. For the most part, however, these are objects of little vitality, often functioning only seasonally.

Village streets. According to the interviews, this used to be the most vibrant public space in the village. It is also the most common type of public place (34 objects). An important object within the street is the bus stop – in many villages, due to the lack of other places, it is not only a place to wait for transport, but also an important place for young people to meet in the evenings. However, few of the *village streets* have proved to be important at present. The feature everywhere is the low number of users and activities. A resident of the central part of Zawieprzyce claims: “Sometimes when I come out here, lean against the gate, my elbows hurt ... nothing ... I don’t see anyone. (...) in the old days, when you walked through the village, all you did was: ‘Good morning!’, ‘Good morning!’, ‘Good morning!’” However, the highest rated places emphasized the relatively high diversity of users and relatively numerous social activities, as well as the homeliness of this space. Streets today are primarily places of fleeting conversations, sometimes of children’s play. The roads in that part of Spiczyn (which has features similar to a suburban village) have specific features. They do not fulfill the traditional function of a village street (low social activities) but are, rather, a recreational space (running and cycling). In all villages, the streets in the central parts of the village are of the greatest importance, but our research clearly shows that, where there is heavy car traffic, the importance of roads as public spaces decreases dramatically. Optimal are therefore roads in compact areas with low traffic density, where pedestrians walk on the street (without pavements). In such places, the road still serves as a meeting place. In such places, there are also specific elements of development, i.e., benches put up by residents at their properties. This is a typical example for rural areas, where the space is publicly managed but informally developed by the residents. In the case of *village streets*, this is nonetheless an increasingly rare phenomenon.

Neighborhood space. In post-socialist countries, much of agriculture was nationalized, and some villages were transformed into urban settlements with multi-family housing. In Poland, this phenomenon occurs only in some regions and villages. Today, state-owned enterprises are usually privatized. However, we still have an atypical form of village layout and development – and at the same time an unusual type of public places such as spaces between or around blocks of flats, which we

defined as “*neighborhood space*”. We have identified three such places in the surveyed villages. The initial attempt to include them in the recreational spaces turned out to be misguided due to clear differences in at least two criteria. Firstly, these places are dominated by necessary and social activities, and only in third place by recreational ones. Secondly, these places are most often arranged by the residents themselves, who are also often the owners of the land (as a community or in exceptional cases even as individual owners of particular fragments – e.g., the village of Jedlanka Stara). However, while all residents are users, it is mainly older adults and seniors who take care of the space. What is important is that these places are theoretically accessible to all but are clearly dominated by the residents of the blocks of flats, which means that they sometimes function as semi-public places.

Recreational places. These are places such as parks, meadows, squares without services, sports facilities, playgrounds, gyms, beaches and recreation centers, i.e., places created officially and dedicated to recreational function. In the surveyed villages, this is one of the most abundant categories (comprising as many as 31 sites) and at the same time one of the highest rated in terms of vitality. They were rated highest for characteristics such as visitability, diversity of activities, diversity of users (except for playgrounds and sports facilities), and recreational and social activities. Some *recreational places* are also one of the important places for meeting strangers. It is worth noting that many facilities in the surveyed villages have several functions at the same time. Sports facilities can be both recreational and meeting places, and occasionally serve as venues for large outdoor events. *Recreational places* are usually located on the outskirts of villages. Most are relatively new and well-equipped with recreational elements (arbors, benches, playground equipment, bridges, etc.). The majority of these sites are relatively new and well equipped with recreational facilities (gazebos, benches, playground equipment, piers, etc.), but their relationship with the surroundings and other public spaces is poor. The majority of their users are young people, children and young adults. Unfortunately, in villages, still few older adults and seniors use recreational places. However, the way in which individual places function can vary greatly and is the result of many overlapping factors. For example, playgrounds are a relatively new element in the Polish countryside. Some were completely ignored by the interviewees or treated as an unimportant element of a larger whole. Others were considered the most important public place (e.g., Stoczek). Interestingly, a family

living next to the playground in Stoczek for six years claims that the place is completely empty. Another family living a bit further away (but still in the village) claims that it is a lively place, that the inhabitants fought for it for a long time and that it is now a very important meeting place. It can be seen that judgements about the vitality of a place can sometimes be subjective and emotional – in this case probably arising from a commitment to creating the place. The playground in Kijany, on the other hand, is one of the few places of this type that were created as grassroots initiatives by inhabitants. Perhaps its informal character is the reason why it is used mainly by young people, while public playgrounds are used mainly by parents with small children. The situation is different in the village of Kolonia Dratów, where the playground was created on a private and fenced property and is used by children from the whole village – usually without parental supervision. In general, however, the highest scores were given to those playgrounds that are part of larger multifunctional spaces.

Semi-natural places. These are places located in natural surroundings outside built-up areas – especially waterside places, field paths, forest clearings, hidden places or viewpoints. They can also include some places in built-up areas – but rather unused, informal areas covered with wild vegetation. They are numerous (24 objects) but do not achieve very high overall ratings, due to the high individuality of their use. Some were completely unknown to some of the interviewees, while for others they were one of the most important places for meetings and recreation in the village. The villages that were indicated by the inhabitants most often are situated by rivers or lakes. This is on the one hand due to the nature of the surveyed villages, but on the other hand shows that water bodies are unique places and attract various activities. Although most often there are private plots directly adjacent to the river or lake, the river is treated by most inhabitants as a common and generally accessible space (this also results from the Polish law). In the case of *semi-natural places*, features such as recreational activities, diversification of activities and sometimes visitability are important. Interestingly, despite the small number of users, some *semi-natural places* rated social activities relatively high. The main users are young people and adult males. The main people taking care of these places are individuals or informal groups. They also sometimes create temporary forms of management for these places. These are benches, tables, fireplaces, bridges, etc. built in a DIY style, without paved surfaces and trodden rather than mown. This semi-wild style

was pointed out by interviewees as the main value of these sites.

In addition to all the above-mentioned types of public spaces, it is worth emphasizing the role of private places, which often merge with the public spaces and take over some of their functions. In addition to the often-mentioned meetings on private properties, it is also worth noting the private riverside spaces that are used by the general public, partly because of legal regulations (guaranteeing free access to the river) as well as the consent of the owners, who often go beyond what is prescribed by law. Also, private service facilities, usually better developed than public facilities, attract more inhabitants and in some places become the main center of social or recreational activities.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Many people, especially officials but also researchers, treat as public places only those sites that were consciously shaped as places for meeting or recreation. This situation also applies to many planning documents. Our research on the vitality of RPP based on interviews with inhabitants shows, however, that most public places in villages become so unintentionally, as if by chance. These places are sometimes created with service, communication or even sport functions in mind, without the intention to create a meeting place for the local community. One could even introduce a separate division of RPP into those created intentionally and those created spontaneously. The latter would include many *shops, streets, semi-natural places or surroundings of other services*. This shows how much needs to be done in terms of awareness of those responsible for shaping space in rural municipalities. The question to what extent RPP should be shaped top-down and officially, and to what extent bottom-up and informal development should be allowed, remains open.

Looking at the proposed division and its characteristics, one can clearly see the great importance of *multifunctional village squares* and *grocery surroundings* but also quite different *recreational places* and *semi-natural places*. Such results confirm the conclusion of A. M. Włodarczyk (2014), who wrote that RPPs placed centrally or near to nature are the most integrative for inhabitants. It seems that this last type is most characteristic for rural areas. While most of the most popular green areas in cities are designed and intensively used parks, green areas in villages are very extensive, not very frequented and managed from the bottom up or informally by users, but at the same time they

are important places for the local community. The importance of such places has been confirmed by other researchers describing them as *hidden places* (Mantey & Kępkowicz, 2018), *village grasslands* (Górka, 2012) or *waterside places* (Niedźwiecka-Filipiak, 2006; Piyapong et al., 2019). Waterside areas in particular may be the best example of the role and importance of semi-natural places. This is due to their high symbolic values, the intermingling of public and private property and, at the same time, the freedom of access and grassroots forms of development that provide a sense of familiarity.

However, in the studied villages, we did not find reasons to separate *public green space* and *unorganized green space* as was done by A. Szczepańska and K. Pietrzyk (2019) for a small town. This is due to the specificity of villages, where buildings are surrounded on all sides by open areas, and residents have their own gardens – so usually there is no need to create public green areas nor therefore also to separate public green space from recreational spaces in the typology. Also, the *urban interiors* identified by these authors do not generally exist in the countryside and similar *neighborhood spaces* exist only where the multi-family buildings typical of cities are situated in the countryside.

Compared to urban or suburban areas, it is also characteristic that there is no separate category defined as *civic space* (Carmona, 2010), *places of memory* (Bierwiazzonek et al., 2012) or *representative places* (Kilian, 1998). In the countryside, we tend to deal with memorial or representational objects that function as parts of streets or multifunctional village squares. This also applies to other spaces with specific niche purposes. With a small number of inhabitants, the scale and frequency of such niche activities is too small to create a separate type of RPP. The best places to function are therefore multifunctional spaces adapted to many different activities and user groups. This is also confirmed by experience from the practice of creating RPP (Włodarczyk, 2014) and comparative studies (Micek & Staszewska, 2019).

In the studied villages, we also did not confirm the special or distinctive role of *club spaces* described by D. Mantey and A. Kępkowicz (2018) for suburban villages. Residents' opinions suggest that, in villages, activities that in cities or suburbs are typical precisely of *club spaces* or *third places* (Oldenburg, 2010; Bierwiazzonek et al., 2012) take place in closed private houses, gardens or farm buildings (private stables, playgrounds in the garden, a dance in the barn or a yoga room in the attic of a house), usually in a group of closer and more distant friends from the neighborhood. This

is due to the opportunities offered by the ownership of large properties and closer social ties combined with the scarcity and poorer performance of public services and institutions.

It is also worth mentioning the types of RPP that we have designated in rural areas, but which play a relatively minor role for the community. These are primarily *village streets* and *sacred places* and also some of the *other service facilities surroundings*. This is due both to social changes and to the increase in car traffic, and in the case of service facilities also to their very poor and incompetent spatial arrangement that ignores their connection with the surroundings. However, this is an issue that requires separate research.

The typology and characteristics of RPP presented here can have concrete applications in the design and management of rural spaces. Our research shows that, in the countryside, special care should be taken to combine functions and create multifunctional spaces. This applies especially to the surroundings of service facilities. Grocery shops provide the greatest vitality, and it is around them that the main village meeting places should be organized. Recreational spaces, on the other hand, need to increase the diversity of users. The management of rural spaces should take into account the fact that some functions are carried out on private land or in rural surroundings and that not all the types of RPP that exist in towns are necessary in the countryside. On the other hand, much more importance should be given to the social role of the village street – which in the smallest villages may be the only possible public space. It is also advisable to maintain a certain freedom in the development and use of certain places, as this is a characteristic of the countryside that determines its identity and unique character. This task can be difficult and demanding, especially for public administration. It is therefore an issue that requires further detailed research and verification in the various regions of Europe.

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