

Trouble in Paradise – Appendix

Atelier Fanelsa

TRANSCRIPT

Appendix is an expansion of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition presented at the Polish Pavilion at the Biennale Architettura 2021. It is the result of discussions with members of the six architectural teams invited to work on the project, which took place between March and April 2021. A year of waiting for the opening of the Biennale, postponed by the pandemic, prompted the participants of the exhibition to ask themselves to what extent the themes and solutions proposed in their projects are still relevant in the new reality. In the third episode we listen to the conversation between Rafał Śliwa and Niklas Fanelsa of Atelier Fanelsa, authors of the *Village Commons* project.

POLISH PAVILION AT THE 17TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION — LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Venice, 22 May–21 September 2021

Trouble in Paradise

curators: PROLOG +1 (Mirabela Jurczenko, Bartosz Kowal, Wojciech Mazan, Bartłomiej Poteralski, Rafał Śliwa and Robert Witczak)

participants

architectural teams: Atelier Fanelsa, GUBAHÁMORI + Filip + László Demeter, KOSMOS Architects, Rural Office for Architecture, RZUT, Traumnovelle

authors of the *Panorama of the Polish Countryside* Jan Domicz, Michał Sierakowski, Paweł Starzec, PROLOG +1

authors of the *Glossary* (online): Michał Sierakowski, Paweł Starzec, Wiktoria Wojciechowska, Patrycja Wojtas, PROLOG +1

exhibition visual identification, catalogue graphic design: zespół wespół

organiser: Zachęta — National Gallery of Art

Polish Pavilion commissioner: Hanna Wróblewska, Director of Zachęta — National Gallery of Art

Polish Pavilion office: Ewa Mielczarek, Joanna Waśko

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OFFICE BACKGROUND

Rafał:

Niklas, when we found your office we immediately thought that we would like to have you on board, since we read this particular sentence on the website, that align very much with our agenda: *The studio investigates contemporary forms of working, living and commoning in the countryside, the periphery, and the city.* Could you tell us a little bit more about this agenda and how it began for you?

Niklas:

Yes. So thanks for the overall invitation and also the possibility of extending some of the ideas in this format. I think what is important and what you also mentioned is that we investigate these three areas. Today they could also be seen as one, but we feel that each has its distinct character. And for us, it's important to put the emphasis on the countryside. So we're not mentioning the urban centre first, but the countryside first and then the periphery and then the city.

We basically would like to start viewing the city and the countryside from a point of view from being in the countryside and not the opposite way because we feel that currently a lot of decision making, a lot of narration in the context of the countryside is done from a viewpoint of the city. We feel that we need to kind of switch this moment.

Basically we are a team of international architects and we have one practice in Gerswalde, in the northern German countryside and then another practice and another satellite office we recently opened. It is in Eden, you can call it the periphery of Berlin and let's say the main office is in Berlin itself in the center. We kind of like to see these kind of three points, which also means that we need to travel so we cannot be static in one location but we need to kind of travel and in this way we travel but also our ideas and travelling. I think this is an important point in understanding our approach.

Rafał:

Exactly. I remember also that at a certain moment you mentioned you were taking part in many competitions for the city, for the schools, for the housing, for various projects that were allowed in Germany, but at a certain moment you also switched to be more engaged in the countryside. Was it perhaps with one of the first projects also that you were involved in Walsdorf, the Garage project?

Niklas:

Yes, I mean, this project in particular in Walsdorf, the small garage, we started as a collective of fellow students and fellow graduates. We felt that during our time in university we were educated and trained in a way to kind of have a good start in our market and especially in Germany there is this kind of myth of the young architecture office. That's an example from GMP, whose first project they did was an airport competition. They won it and they became a famous and big successful office. As students, we felt this is still the way we are trained at the university. This is also connected to competitions, obviously.

As students, we felt we wanted to experience something else, for this we moved to the countryside close to the Belgian border where we started at this time. One father of this collective had a house and he basically needed a garage. This was the starting point to move there for almost over half a year, and to engage in this local context and also start building a structure without building permission, like what is possible without building permission.

In this region of Germany, it's around 50 square metres and four metre high roof. So it's quite a building you can already say. For us, it was important to be there to do the design, to live there, to communicate, to speak with craftsmen. And this was the kind of first approach of getting your hands dirty.

Rafał:

I saw it as a kind of way to define an alternative model of making the architecture, right? Of the deeper involvement, having probably more influence and also being more efficient in the whole process by involving and being in close relationship with everyone.

This reminds me very much about the workshops that you are leading. If I remember well, until now, there have been five workshops that you organised, with the last one being 'The Patterns of Rural Commoning' as an emerging curator program at CCA in Montreal. Right now, as we are talking, you have announced another workshop, 'Places of Rural Practise'. So basically it seems that this sort of experience returns back in the form of workshop as a form of engagement. So does it play any kind of a role in defining your practise as an ongoing thing?

Niklas:

Yes, I would say it's very important, this format, because it allows us to tackle topics and engage with places and people without the necessity of a project. We currently are very engaged in this theme of the countryside, let's say, and we see different formats, like one format is a building project another format is an exhibition, another format publication or a workshop. Of course, the project has a very long time and engagement. But we see it first as a kind of equal level. It's not that the exhibition comes after the project, but sometimes the exhibition or workshop is first and out of this engagement starts other topics.

In the sense, it was a more spontaneous start. At first it was more a place, a context-driven workshop. And then the second, let's say involvement was that we were selected for this emerging curator programme at CCA and it allowed us to kind of give a bigger framework, also an international framework to this idea of the workshop. And we hope to also have a series in Canada at the end of the year.

And I think because this was always important to us that the workshops are very local, very specific format, but in order to be meaningful, it also needs to address bigger topics on different scales and also topics on an international level. And that's the reason we are now, let's say, in the third phase. The third phase is what we are doing this year with a workshop programme called 'Places of Rural Practice'. It's kind of five topics, about ten workshops, over five tutors, and a hundred twenty participants. It's you know, it's bigger ambition and with this we are also collaborating with the architecture chamber. So we are kind of certified with the programme, a course for education of architects.

THE PROJECT

Rafał:

In all of these workshop programmes, it seems that somehow the village is at the central point, the sort of scale of the settlement is at the central focus of the workshops, as many elements somehow come to define it. And probably this leads us directly to the subject of the exhibition and your participation. When anyone is listening to us at this moment can look up the proposal, both in the form of the pictures from the exhibition, but also in the form of the catalogue that is still available online. Everything that you mentioned about workshops somehow aligns very much with the idea of your proposal, could you somehow tell us a little bit more about it, its title and how it started.

Niklas:

The project also started with our engagement, with our satellite office being in the north of Germany near the Polish border. For the moment, we were asked for the kind of contribution or idea it was very clear for us that we are kind of looking from this point close to the border. We came across this kind of phenomena that actually the nearest biggest city is not Berlin, but Szczecin in Poland. So basically the place where we are now, you can also see it as the metropolitan area of Szczecin in Poland.

We have read newspaper articles, which said that because of the land price now many Szczecin inhabitants or people from the region move to Germany as the land prices are very cheap and it is easy to build a house there and there is German-Polish school recently opened, so it seems attractive to move there. Also because of the free EU border free movement, this was a reason. We discovered that there are many villages on German territory which are being transformed by these new Polish settlers. They, of course, were bringing a new approach. They are a younger generation of people. This was our starting point on this kind of territorial level. Where suddenly a part of Germany becomes a kind of metropolitan Polish area and there is somehow this hybrid condition. Then we kind of picked one village in particular and closely investigated. This village had a kind of type with a green village common in the middle and the houses surrounding it and a belt of production.

We felt that this is a kind of good model, and could become a kind of model village of future development. The next stage we thought, OK, if this is a starting point of this model city, what elements are missing? Like some common infrastructure, like some spatial markers and slowly we kind of transformed this village into a more prototype for other villages for other region.

In a way it is based on one particular observation, but it still has a reference, but we try to bring it to a more universal type. I think, in the traditional villages in the centre there was a Green Zone, a form of commons, common area. We thought this could be a good idea to reintroduce this central zone as an important zone for the whole village.

There could be a guest house, some public functions, like a library or a small communal space, but at the same time, there could also be a common energy production, for example. The traditional villages were closely related to the land and the agricultural system and of course when we now want to reintroduce this model, it's important also to reintroduce models like a common energy production, for example.

Rafał:

This somehow comes back to the title. The Village Commons is the title of the project. As you mentioned, this is the case of what is inside of the village. This sort of core where the cooperation happens. I remember there was a co-op kiosk, there was this plan that you mentioned and various other elements that you might actually observe also in the villages like Gerswalde itself, which is somehow exemplary also for the condition of cooperation.

So the Commons played a particular role in every project of the exhibition, but also in the analytical elements of the exhibition. But in your particular proposal I think that the commons are present also in the settlement, which was your starting point, but also outside of the settlement, in terms of what is happening between the villages?

Niklas:

What was interesting in this village is this kind of layered structure. It has the core, the centre, which is like the kind of festive ground of open public spaces, like buildings of public functions. Then you have the kind of individual houses which have working and living use and then there's a kind of very linear small plots where you can have small agriculture, there could also be further production.

This defines more or less the core of the village itself and then on the other layer there is the kind of more agricultural land. We thought it would also be interesting that this agricultural land is owned by the city and it also can be used by the city in some way for production or for their purpose. We could imagine that each village also could have a sort of character, that one village is more focused on crops, the other more on animals, the third village maybe more on energy production in some way. There could also be some kind of link in between those villages.

I would say compared to most of the other proposals it is a more realistic vision. But maybe through this realistic vision that could also be something radical. I think it's always a question. Do you need to be very extreme to make a radical position or can already be something based on the existing condition?

Rafał

I think that's extremely accurate, this sort of soft radicalism. Precisely what we asked every participant to do is to, despite starting from their own scale, which we assorted, your settlement, to think in territorial scale and also in the scale of dwelling. I think that precisely the sort of territoriality of your proposal is extremely concise in terms that it develops a network of interrelated villages of which each of them has some sort of limits in terms of the amount of inhabitants. What are actually the limits between the villages?

Niklas:

I think there needs to be a limit in terms of people or the type of community, I think 150 to 300 people, I would imagine. Then it's very small, but of course, some villages could also have a character like that has some focus on health care for elderly living, which also needs to be included in some way.

Our main idea or target was that we should find a certain narrative which cannot be developed in this city or urban scheme. That's the reason we were more aiming for an alternative narrative for the rural condition and not copy existing narrative from urban condition to the countryside. I think it's basically the main question, what is this future? It is a kind of urban condition that expands to the rural setting and basically it will be agriculture dominated by drones and robots and the rest is a kind of condensed urban condition.

Or that there is kind of urban condition and the total opposite rural condition, which has different qualities and there's a coexistence.

THE PROCESS

Rafał:

It seems that your answer is precisely the answer based upon the idea of coexistence in this local scale, which is very precise in terms that it treats the border as a territory. That it's not simply a marked line on the map, but a larger area that we notice, I believe, not only in Central Europe, in between Poland and Germany.

There's an interesting fact we may mention already that a Swiss Pavilion is also being concerned with borderland as a territory. Their proposal is simply trying to tackle the problematics of what is happening around the border of Switzerland when there are very various relations unnoticed between the various nations and small communities that live their own life irrespective of the condition of administrative division. I like this aspect very much Niklas, that you brought to the table, because our question was also about the 93 percent of the Polish land and its administrative division, because it somehow covers a specific problem that within this 93 percent, there are not necessarily only villages.

There is a huge amount of, I wouldn't say pristine, but agricultural land and also of the suburban territories. What you added to the general concept is that you might look even beyond that 93 percent, because what is happening outside of the borders also has the impact on what is happening inside of the country, which simply makes us think that our larger territorial outlook is necessary in here.

I think that this brings us to this idea that you were mentioning also that you were observing in other places of your experience in Japan and also in Germany. That this is not only the situation that happens in terms of this migration of the people and in terms of the coexistent treatment of the land.

Niklas:

Yes. Of course now and also in Canada, or like in France, I mean, now during the COVID condition there were a lot of people getting interested again in the countryside and it's kind of potential and it's kind of a quality, because suddenly you see if I have just a small apartment in the city, part of my yearly experience was that I go for a holiday to kind of nice place somewhere else and now I'm stuck in a small apartment in the city.

There's no culture life, there is no social life. I think this also makes people reconsider their priorities. Now everybody is experiencing working at home, working at a different location. That's actually possible. So I think people experienced it and realise that it's kind of pushing the interest in the countryside even more, as an alternative living model.

I think one of the first who noticed that was the kind of telephone companies, because suddenly they noticed a lot of people are kind of not in the urban core anymore, they are outside the urban cores for longer period of time.

Rafał:

Do you think that this is a condition that is still keeping us connected to the city, that we can move outside to the rural areas, but nevertheless, we have to be close to the city to return? Or is the countryside maybe becoming more self-sufficient?

Niklas:

I would like to aim for the direction that it's becoming in a way, self-sufficient in some places, but connected. I think this is for me one main interest, but one main difference to the kind of 60s and 70s developments from the hippies or the kind of people, especially in the United States, moving out as they wanted to be self-sufficient. They wanted to open up these communes, which may be connected at the local level, which, of course, has also a kind of PR network of other communes, but basically they want to completely be detached from the existing economic model.

I feel now people still want to be connected. So they want to have the qualities and the condition of the countryside, but they still want to be connected to the existing system. I see a big potential in this connection on the international level.

We are very good in the network of cities and urban areas on an international and European level, but I also see potential in connecting a place in Japan with a rural place in Germany and a rural place in Poland. And maybe suddenly something totally different can appear from this connection.

THE REPRESENTATION

Rafał:

Thank you for bringing that back into the conversation. I think we will return to the general condition of the COVID that you mentioned before. For a moment, I would return to the project itself and to its representation.

What we can see in the catalogue and in the exhibition, are the hand-drawn maps, hand-drawn illustrations and also the collages, which represent probably the sights from outside from the territory, but also from the inside being at place in the village as you imagine it. Could you tell us somehow if the idea of the hand-drawn map is simply a tool for you that is efficient, or does it convey more ideas that are maybe referring to the old maps and how they were drawn? What is the idea behind it for the representation?

Niklas:

I think one connection is, of course, these kinds of old maps, these hand-drawn maps which have a certain quality and certain personal connection to the one doing it, so there's this level. For us, it's a little bit a connection also to the audience or the user, the people who you want to address, because this connects also with the collages. For us, it's kind of an unfinished project, it is in an unfinished condition. Photorealistic rendering is a finished condition I want to sell or to present it to a client or to a developer and for us as you see, we are surrounded with these models, which are the kind of artefacts, but they are still working models for us, we change them and we do one after the other.

I think this is important, that for us the collages are one step in a process and we would be happy and continue this process. It has the touch that basically render would be a collage on the table that people could interfere or work with them. So the same as with the models at a table you presented in front of a public committee. The public committee can kind of take a model and move it and I think this cannot happen with a rendering or with a drawn map.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Rafał:

So it is this condition of the constant modification of the constant possibility that is inherent in it. Someone who will look at your collages will notice that you take the photograph as the basis of it. And the photograph is the existing condition, on which simply you put over the elements. It looks as a constant possibility of being changed and readopted. Something that refers very much also to the condition of the workshop and the condition of your early research project in Walsdorf that simply underlines, I guess, how concise the whole approach is.

This last aspect that we wanted to tackle together is the problematic of COVID. I guess, we are still in this sort of suspended time. You remember the precise moment when we were finishing our project for the exhibition was the time when the COVID was acknowledged as the pandemic in Europe. We had to put our work on hold, however the work was ready back then. Now this experience of delay, would you change anything with the proposal, if you knew about the pandemic before?

Niklas:

I think not so much. I think I would keep it as it is and try to be a little bit more radical with its direction. What I would choose more is the possibility of working remotely, which I think now people are interested in that. But basically I think that the topic would stay the same.

Rafał:

You mentioned before, the COVID somehow articulated the role of the countryside from the perspective of the location of your office in Gerswalde in this region. Can you say a little bit what sort of influence it had on their living and working conditions from the people that decided maybe to move out? Also, did you notice that there were more clients that were interested in moving out to this condition? Was it such a general shift?

Niklas:

I think now there are more people interested in moving out. The land prices are getting up, people are looking for closer opportunities for tourism and a more regional approach became more interesting for a lot of people. There is closer proximity they are looking at. So in this sense, I would say that the pandemic kind of accelerated this kind of movement.

Rafał:

But do you think it is temporary?

Niklas:

No, I think it will be going on for the next 10 years at least. But it's also a question, what happens then, if it's like a wave, if things come in waves, but this is difficult to predict, because I feel now this new interest in the countryside has just started. And it's just at the beginning in the sense.

Rafał:

From your perspective, was it so that only the more privileged people could move to the countryside? Or maybe in the area about which we are talking, is it more accessible to the younger people? Because there is such a tendency to think that young people need cities and to have the places of convergence, of meeting, to find their own network, to define themselves more.

Niklas:

I think in the sense the countryside was like the youth and the elderly. I think the countryside currently is catering a lot for this kind of family and like the typical family, like the freestanding house, but the youth and other family models and elderly people are a little bit forgotten currently. I mean, this we also see in the housing market in Germany. The housing market currently produces a lot of single family houses and a lot of luxurious or a little bit higher standard apartment blocks or conditions that you can sell or rent.

This kind of middle middle zone is not very focussed on at the moment. So I would say main production is these two types. There I see some big potential in providing typologies or forms of living or forms of architecture and addressing this. And of course, the big topic of infrastructure, public infrastructure is very important in the countryside, because it's not very economic to have a doctor in every village or to have a bank or post office in every village. This kind of declined in Germany. But I think now it's the question, how can these everyday services be provided? There are not so many concepts.

Rafał:

But do you think that there is a possibility that this might be discussed more in the future from the administrative perspective? I am just assuming that there is a tendency for the shift to the countryside and thinking that maybe we are not speaking about a return to the normal that we knew, but we have to adapt somehow to the new condition that will be still ongoing concerning the pandemic.

Niklas:

Yes, I mean, that's always the key word of the New Normal. So, I could imagine that if this pandemic is over it may be another form of pandemic or condition. So I think this will definitely influence a lot of our lifestyle. So next year will not be similar to two years ago.

Rafał:

Exactly with this, I'm also looking forward to seeing what will happen after. Thank you very much Niklas. It's been a really great pleasure to have you in here and to talk with you about all the project. Thank you for your time.

Niklas:

You are welcome. Thank you.
