

## Trouble in Paradise – Appendix

### RZUT

#### 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 sixth episode we listen to the conversation between Rafał Śliwa and Łukasz Stepniak of RZUT Quarterly Magazine, authors of the *Social Infrastructure* 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 wspólny

**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:**

Lukasz, for us the decision to have Polish participants in the projects section wasn't an easy one, since we immediately saw a condition of at once not being objective but at the same time we could be missing the potential of having someone with the insight, someone local and at the same time we knew it cannot be us, the curators. Once we agreed that we don't want to lose the potential the question was: who can represent the appropriate balanced approach? Our thought was we shouldn't take a typical office: RZUT can do it: can you tell us, what is RZUT and how did you come about to become a quarterly magazine?

### **Łukasz:**

RZUT, as far as I can define it, is a multidisciplinary team that operates as an editorial board for an architectural magazine. We're not a usual architectural practice. It was a surprise that you invited us to participate in the project because it was the first design that we have met that was not using words, but it was using images and visual culture. Usually we work with words and narratives, trying to get a deeper understanding of the built environment, but we never did the project, even if it's more speculative, even if it's more theoretical than a traditional architectural project. What we were trying to do is to fill the gap between theory and practice. Basically we think that a clear division between thinking and doing doesn't make a lot of sense. It's just the two sides of the same coin. Normally we use text to analyse problems and speculate about possible futures.

When you invited us to participate in the Biennale exhibition and asked us to develop a scenario for the countryside, it was for us a technical issue of changing the media representation and a switch to visual representations. In fact, everything that we do is about discourse and intellectual provocation, we can do it with words as well as with images. It was maybe quite difficult for us to switch to work as an office a little bit, because we are not used to it. We usually work as an editing board. We work online and we don't use the traditional architecture media. Nevertheless, some of us are practitioners, so we could somehow join this experience and use everything we know to create a proposal.

### **Rafał:**

As I understand this was your first design project, wasn't it?

### **Łukasz:**

Yes, basically we made some speculations, but they were rather more theoretical manifestos than the real project.

### **Rafał:**

I have the feeling that it basically, as you said, fills the gap that there is in Polish architectural discourse. At the same time, it constructs our knowledge and criticism within this field from a bottom up position, because your main element of the magazine is the open call. It is gathering the collective knowledge from which you as the editorial board choose, but you give a space to the people to speak about. What does this sort of collective intelligence bring to you as a group of people?

### **Łukasz:**

It's an interesting question, I always ask myself this question every day. I think we can use this knowledge because we work in architectural offices. At the same time as we are working as an editorial board for a magazine. For us, it is not just thinking about architecture or doing something just to write and to achieve some scientific goals. For us it is also a means of production of knowledge. It doesn't matter if you make a building or if you make a text or a manifesto. Text can last longer than a building, in fact. What's interesting for us is just producing this knowledge and

getting a deeper understanding of what's happening with the environment, so we can do it more wisely and rethink what we are doing. Basically, it's a device to broaden the discourse. It's always the same strategy or the same type of activity to write, to build and to design. It doesn't matter. It's just a change of media that we are using. In fact, it's all about words and it's all about discourse and it's all about planning the future. What architecture forgot about in the last decade is that it was always about rethinking the future and possible scenarios for the future. Right now, the neoliberal governance and the economy led us to the situation where we're just working for the markets and we don't have time and resources to speculate. I think it's very important to go back and have some time to allow yourself to rethink the situation and think it over and get the knowledge of what, in fact, you're doing.

**Rafał:**

Once you mentioned the magazine is somehow making a small building. You also consider it from the point of view of a storyline or a narrative, but at the same time of building intelligence because buildings bring these sorts of scenarios. I am very interested in the collective intelligence that you created as a group of people that have known each other for a long time, because how many are you?

**Łukasz:**

There were always eight people and right now with Wojtek it is already nine.

**Rafał:**

And are you all architects?

**Łukasz:**

Basically, all of us were trained as architects, but as I said before, we are a multidisciplinary team because a lot of us also studied in different fields. We've got sociologists, people that studied cultural sciences, art, for example. We're trying to mix all the fields and get more, not multidisciplinary, but rather transdisciplinary environments to work. I think that getting out of architecture for a while and looking from a distance at the discipline is really crucial for us right now, because you got used to the architectural fantasmas. When you look from a point of view of a different discipline, I think that what really moves forward somehow. That's basically why we wanted to make a magazine that it's not closed, but has this strategy of calling for papers and it's open for everyone that would like to write, because we didn't want to make a small community of architecture theoreticians, that's in all issues would be the same people that will be writing and criticising. We're trying to open up to different fields, different disciplines, so that everyone that is interested in space can write something and create this common intelligence. What I find the most inspiring texts are usually not by architects, but written by sociologists, psychologists or other disciplines.

## *THE PROJECT*

**Rafał:**

I also find it very interesting that there are ultimately many people from other disciplines contributing to the magazine and also contributing to developing your own point of view as a group of individuals that are somehow also learning from it. I'm very curious how this idea of developing such a kind of project, that starts from social consciousness, how does it inform your work for the Biennale and your project which you call *Social Infrastructure*? Can you tell us more about it?

**Łukasz:**

We called our project *Social Infrastructure* because the goal of this project was to provide opportunities for more even development of the communities in rural areas. We are really focussing on the community and not on the abstract

space of the countryside, let's say. If you look at the territory of Poland, you will find out that more than 90 percent of its territory is legally defined as the countryside, but it's at the same time inhabited by 40 percent of the country's population. When we look at the statistics, what we find interesting is that only 10 percent of those people live from agriculture. Meaning that agriculture is the basic source of their income, only 10 percent out of 40 percent. It's not very much. What it means is that the countryside is not defined by food production anymore and has become a strange hybrid of suburbs warehouses and picturesque farms for higher classes that escape the city for a weekend.

We've got this environment of the countryside, which is really interesting. All the architects started to focus on the countryside after Rem Koolhaas said it's interesting. We had a lot of scientists also in Poland that were deeply investigating this topic of the countryside even before. There we made a small research about what's really happening, because we are really facing a very rapid change and modernisation of the countryside.

To give an example, the market and big landowners are forcing a scenario right now where the countryside will become like a backroom for the city and the source of low income physical workers. We just thought that this scenario is not very sustainable, in fact. It ignores the existing social and physical resources. That was the reason why we tried to look at the possibility of more evenly distributed development of the territory. During the design process, we started to look at the strategy of our Ministry of Agriculture. We surprisingly got inspired by a television conference by a former agricultural minister, Jan Krzysztof Ardanowski. He was in Osiecin, a small village where he had a conference next to a farm of photovoltaic cells where he said that he imagines that the Polish countryside could become a big green power plant. We thought it's a very bold and modern idea, which was surprising for the government that we had. We thought that we should treat it literally and we should give it a try and develop this concept.

We have even written a letter to the Ministry of Agriculture stating that what he said was a great idea and we want to follow this idea by preparing a design for him so that he could use it in the whole territory of Poland and at the end we can change the whole countryside. Unfortunately, Minister Ardanowski was fired a few months later. I don't know if this was the reason or there were some different reasons. Anyway we have a different Minister right now. We find it interesting to think what would it mean to the rural part of Poland to become a power plant?

It would mean that the countryside could sustain its role as a place for production of energy, but not an energy understood as far as food and calories, but electricity, heating and cooling and so on. We think that the villages do not need densification of housing, because what's important is that they have some kind of generosity of space. That's what defines them. But the countryside needs densification of infrastructure and job opportunities. What's necessary right now is to produce job opportunities and to produce infrastructure for them to develop in a more sustainable way. Even if not to develop, it's just to survive.

We think it's also crucial not to have a strategy of development of the whole country or even the whole world, but that we will have a more even distribution of wealth and governance and even more democratic distribution of urban tissue also. This is why this infrastructure that we are proposing in the form of a power plant becomes social, because it could create some networks of exchange and communication between people.

**Rafał:**

It is a kind of even covering of a field by the infrastructure. The element that is taking the whole territory and in an even manner gives access to various locations, redevelops various locations. The question is actually which locations, because you choose a particular element of the Polish landscape that is very significant for its socialist history. What was it?

**Lukasz:**

The State Agricultural Farms, they are called in Polish PGRs. The state owned agricultural farms, which was a political device used during the socialist times, used to nationalise the land and production. We had huge state owned farms that were basically covering the whole countryside area and made the whole governance in the agricultural sector. They became all abandoned and closed during the transformation period of the 90s. Now it's a problematic part of the Polish landscape. We have those huge farms that are half abandoned and quite poor in fact. We are not sure what to do with it. In your curatorial strategy you mentioned it would be important to look at the topic of commons. We thought that this socialist, let's say, communisation of agricultural farms is something that could be in dialogue with the idea of commons. We thought it was very interesting to take a look at the collectivisation of work and the collectivisation of living. What could we do with those state owned farms today? There are a lot of prefabricated multi-family houses in the countryside that will provide shelter for the farm workers. They are all very bad technical conditions, half empty. What we found interesting about the socialist real estates in the countryside, that it was a pure modernist idea of a freestanding multi-storey multifamily prefabricated housing.

When you look at it at first glance, you might think it's something alien for the countryside and for the rural regions. In fact, when you look at the Villa Savoye and modernist concepts, they were made for a land like this - fields of greenery and that you don't have any neighbours and you just have a very generous piece of land. We try to rethink the modernist concept for the countryside in the context of the state owned agricultural farms.

We looked at the villages, such as Klecewo as an example, which is a very interesting village in the Pomeranian region in Poland. It has everything that could define a Polish village because it has a neo-renaissance palace from the Prussian family von Rosenberg that is dominating the village. On the other side of the street, you have those state agricultural farms, multi storey prefabricated housing, you have some nostalgic wooden, small wooden houses there and a small pavilion for a shop. Everything that you can imagine interesting for the Polish countryside is there. When we took a look at the housing that is there and a lot of other villages in Poland, those freestanding housing units were modified. When you take a look at them today, what you see is that a lot of additional objects were added to them. They were organically growing and growing over the last decades. They look more like traditional homesteads rather than modernist freestanding objects.

Somehow this rural typology of a homestead overtakes the basic architectural idea of a building. We thought that we could use this bottom up strategy of adding those rural volumes. They are mainly for the infrastructure of the houses used by the people that live in those houses. We could somehow trigger this development, those growing architectural typologies. We use them somehow in our project, trying to develop a strategy where we have a core that would focus this energy and somehow redistribute it in an organic and bottom-up way. It was a mixture of the participatory philosophy and something that is also designed as a top down infrastructural object. It's a mixture of those two philosophies.

**Rafał:**

This tension was very interesting to me already from the beginning, because in a way, the project does find a way to deal with the post socialist legacy. As you mentioned, today these state agricultural farms are in many instances abandoned. In many senses, they're in very bad conditions. There are documentaries about it. Reportages were written many times about their conditions.

What we see is that states simply abandoned them in the middle of the 90s. 1993 was the year when the abandonment of the project was announced. From this point of view, again, I see this very interesting tension

between the top down approach and somehow the bottom-up, the community based approach. I liked very much that you mentioned the idea of revisiting the modern ideal of housing that is developed on the pilotis. You brought Villa Savoye, of course, this is known as a remarkable object and it implies the five points on architecture.

However, during the process, the interesting thing was one sketch that you brought. This drawing was showing only the ground plan that was defined by the grid and by the pillars, not by the walls, not by strict divisions of volumes. This open ground plan reminded me very much of what you said about this community based development that you leave the ground for the inhabitants to define how to go on from it. Where does the project start from? From the administration or from the community, or is it really mixed? And then how?

**Lukasz:**

It may be difficult to describe easily because I think that this project is in fact quite complex because you have to describe what's happening from both sides. Both from the side of the government and on top down decisions and both from the side of the community.

The whole narrative was that we create a spine of development, which is funded by the government. It's basically a spine made out of a linear power plant. An object that would be used for producing and sharing the energy to create a community of proponents of energy. For us, it was quite important also to make one object that would focus the attention and focus the way in which those bottom up, chaotic objects will grow. There is the spine of the power plant. It's a linear system a little bit like Oskar Hansen's Linear Continuous System, very much inspired by radical projects of the 60s, of metabolism for example. What they basically tried to do was to create the frame for activities. Our project has the same aim to create a frame that would be filled up with different activities. But it's not necessary to fill it up anyhow. It could be left empty. It's just the frame that you can use, but you don't have to.

This frame connects different settlements in the region. It connects it in a way that you could use it as a means of transportation or as the transfer element for sending energy to the grid and taking it back through the grid. We thought that a device for producing energy and sharing energy should cover basically the whole country. But it is not a continuous element that doesn't have an end or a beginning. It always begins in a settlement and ends up in another settlement.

What we basically tried to do was to make this core that would divide the land, that it would begin a new parcelization of land. For us, it was also important to give limits and restrict the development somehow. Nowadays we have a huge sprawl and everybody's building everywhere. We thought that the system restricts the development to some communication linear elements, that we would have a more sustainable development and densification that is somehow restricted and limited. All the other lands would be left for nature. Would be left to the environment without the necessity of developing anything there.

That was what we were trying to build upon in this scale of a territory - a huge grid of infrastructure that would join different elements. That was more top-down strategy. From the other side, when we are looking at the settlements or the dwellings, we thought that we could use the strategy that we have seen in Klecewo and other villages that used state owned agricultural farms. We could use this spine that is already existing to somehow encourage people to join it and use it as a plugin element that you can always connect with and you can build upon it. You can add in a more chaotic manner, but using the parcels that you have that join your house. You can use the parcel between your private house and the space that is common. You can use the space as much as you want. It can be left empty, it can be left for the greenery or can be covered 100 percent with buildings that we call rural volumes, which are also a kind of infrastructure, but have this semi-public or public programme that you could use up to your imagination.

You can use it to develop your business, or you can use it to develop some kind of social environment where people can meet and have a public space within the countryside. Basically, what we were trying to do is to create the grid for the development of different programmes so that the countryside would become self-sufficient and that you would have everything you need in the distance of one kilometre or a half kilometres. That area would be filled up with programmes.

In our narrative, when you build this democracy of prosumers, when you start to use the energy and produce it on site without buying it from the grid or from the government, it would lead to the economic growth of the countryside. All the people in the countryside suddenly became very rich so they could use the money to develop a social programme for the countryside or a public programme for the countryside. This also refers to our concept of what would happen with those dwellings. We thought if you're going to be responsible for the energy that you're using and if you can sell it, that finally you would end up with the situation where people try to save as much energy as it's possible, because they could sell the rest and get a return in money. It's a win-win situation for everyone because people are saving money and saving the world at the same time. Meaning that you can save the world by getting rich.

It's a pretty pragmatic strategy for the Polish countryside. We thought in terms of dwellings that if people try to sell as much energy as it's possible to the grid, it would lead to minimising the heated space or required HVAC infrastructure and thermal insulation and so on in the dwelling. The strategy for the houses was to minimise the heat and insulated areas or to leave the prefabricated outer shell of this house, but to make it half an outside space. Basically, what is important in those dwellings in the countryside, is the generosity of space. We thought that we could use the current situation, also the situation where people are abandoning those houses in order to minimise the living area and maximise the outside space that is half interior and half exterior.

For example, you would heat the ground floor only and all the other floors will be a buffer zone where the internal climate of the house changes. It would become a house that would change during the season. I think it's also quite a beautiful idea that when you're living in the countryside, you should really understand what's happening with the weather and what's happening with the seasons.

Those houses would become very dynamic and reactive to the outside environment. You would use different spaces in the summer and you would use different spaces in the winter just to save a little bit of money and become rich. I think it's a beautiful situation when you can care about the environment.

## *THE PROCESS*

### **Rafał:**

This is interesting from the point of view that the condition of the dwelling was a kind of spatiality that we ask you to begin from. The curatorial strategy is trying to tackle the countryside from the perspective of the territory, the settlement and the dwelling. The dwelling was something that you described at the end. I'm very interested that you mentioned during the conversation the limit of the proposal - the pristine, the natural landscapes that somehow are supposed to be there. We can notice in the catalogue that in the drawing, it's difficult to notice the limit of the proposal. There is actually the possibility for a still pristine natural landscape.

That somehow leads me to this question of what comes at the end? If you described this complex relationship between bottom-up and top-down, that is actually this mix of actions that is happening as a possibility. I think that

the conjunction of these two elements is in the notion of transformation of the landscape, but also the transformation of state agricultural farms as an element that is problematic in the landscape.

I would be simply interested if this transformation is for you a means to an end, then what is the end? Or is it actually an end in itself, in the way that this is an ongoing condition with which we struggle? This question probably would be relevant for Europe, more than for the other parts of the world, since I guess that today to build in Europe is mostly the condition to start from the existing situation.

You don't start from tabula rasa. There is sometimes this misleading impression that if you are in the countryside, then you can have that tabula rasa condition, but you cannot actually. Do you think that this leads us to consider the notion of transformation as more urgent than ever? What is the end of the transformation here or whether this is only an end in itself?

**Łukasz:**

That's a difficult one, but if I would have to make some generalisations about the project, I would use the words of Lacaton and Vassal - "never demolish and always try to build upon what's already there". We think that it's quite crucial right now to have this even distribution of wealth in the grid of the country and countryside, which is the main part of Poland.

Basically the transformation is the only tool we can use right now. When I looked also at some of the other strategies for the countryside, both in the Polish pavilion and the exposition of OMA there are different strategies like this half earth strategy or shared planet strategy.

They are all focussing on how to limit the development somehow, sometimes quite radically. For us, it was a more pragmatic issue of how to sustain the existing communities. Therefore we think it's not very sustainable to limit the development and the growth to big cities.

What you can really observe is that you've got big cities and the whole development around. Poland is in a situation that is contradictory to the rest of the world, because we still have a growth in the number of residents of villages and of the countryside. But when you take a look at the map, you can see that the countryside is mainly suburbs, in fact. They are just called the countryside, but they have nothing to do with production or agriculture.

I think it's not a very good way to develop a country, in fact. Therefore our proposal aims to leave as much as is possible in the existing environment of the countryside and try to make them self-sufficient so that they won't depend on the cities and on the development of their neighbours. They could sustain themselves with jobs and with public programmes and with all the necessary infrastructure that is needed there.

I think that this is our concept for the transformation to have a more democratic distribution of means of production. It won't focus on a few points, but that we will have a grid of evenly distributed. You can always argue that some of those strategies are trying to radically limit the space for development of humankind. We also find it interesting and we could incorporate it somehow in our project. The aim was to stop the sprawl and stop the situation, as you have also in Poland that you can build on everywhere, almost everything. In order to stop this situation, you need a plan for development. So you need to limit it and limit the land that you can use to build upon and try to find a strategy for further development, because we think that densification is needed if you try to save some space for nature itself.



If you want to have no go zones for humans, that would probably be somehow necessary in the future, you also need to have those limited go zones for people. It is necessary to have a grid of development or a core that would give the direction for the future development. We were trying to draw those limits and draw a linear system that would limit the parcellation and somehow organise the structure of the built environment in the country.

### *THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC*

**Rafał:**

Just probably one last question that I would be very interested to ask you about was the fact of the COVID pandemic that has put us on delay with the work. If you remember, the moment when we were finishing the proposals, preparing the exhibition for Venice, the COVID was acknowledged in Europe as an ongoing pandemic. Now we talk about this experience of delay. The question that everyone had at the time with the exhibition is, would you change anything to the project?

**Łukasz:**

Probably not. Yeah, that was a very specific situation for us because we started before the pandemic and it wasn't a big issue when we were preparing the proposal, but it has changed quite dramatically. When you look at the countryside, you have to say that it has changed rural areas in some ways. We are observing a big exodus from the cities to the villages. The middle classes were locked down in small apartments without balconies. They were massively moving to the countryside, trying to escape in order to find the way to sustain normal, balanced life. The presence of the remote working model, the countryside became more and more attractive.

That affects the prices of land which have skyrocketed and are still rising, as you can observe. And it's difficult to say how this process can affect the spatial structure of the rural areas, but for sure, it could be used to redefine them somehow. It's a massive shift in the social tissue of the countryside. Villages are becoming more and more sexy and they are more sexy than they were a few years ago.

I think that's also another reason why we should try to rethink them and try to steer the development. We should not abandon them, because the strategy of abandoning the countryside and steering the development only to the big cities wouldn't work. Right now we find them very attractive. I think that the market won't allow any major changes to happen on a bigger scale. I'm a little bit pessimistic about the changes that would happen, because I think that inflation will rise due to the economic crisis and people will look for a way to freeze their money and to make an investment. That would lead to more speculation on buildings and more speculation on land. It would lead us to a situation where the land will become an asset that we cannot control anyhow. As architects, we should be lobbying for legislation that treats land the same way as we treat water and fresh air, for example. We should limit the building area to reasonable size in order to save the natural environment. In general, when I look at our project, I think it fits perfectly to the pandemic situation because it's trying to find a solution for developing the countryside, even find space for new investment in the countryside without abandoning it economically and socially. It could work with the situation where we have quite big migration and flow of people from the cities to the countryside. Actually it is quite possible if you look at the trends and what's happening right now.

**Rafał:**

Do you think that even though the pandemic articulated the condition that's the countryside is urgent to be regarded today, there would be any return to the normal or just nothing will change the new conditions?

**Łukasz:**

I think not that much would change. There were a lot of architects, philosophers and theoreticians trying to speculate what's going to happen with the cities and the built environment. For example, if you look at the analysis of the housing market, for example, the only thing that has changed is that the houses became more expensive. It's not that we are buying bigger apartments because we need some office space in the apartment. Nobody can afford a bigger apartment.

The situation is quite similar to what we had before the pandemic, but it's even more tragic, in fact. Everybody's looking for a way to invest the money. And it leads to a dramatic situation in the real estate markets. The main thing that's going to change, that land will become more and more a means of investment or an asset and less and less just a space to live in an environment for people to have a nice life.

**Rafał:**

All right. Thank you very much, because this has been a really great pleasure to talk to you about the project.

**Łukasz:**

Thank you very much and thank you once again for the opportunity, that you trusted us even if we are not an architectural office that specialises in preparing nice visuals. It was a big risk for you, so thank you.

**Rafał:**

It was the risk worth taking.

**Łukasz:**

Definitely nice to hear.

**Rafał:**

Thank you so much again.

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