

# INTRODUCING IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS. THE EXAMPLE OF POLAND<sup>1</sup>

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*with 5 figures in the text*

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## *Summary*

*This paper discusses the problem of spatial perception of rural settlements. Firstly, theoretical basis of the research on rural imagery will be introduced. Then two different methods that might be used in studies of the subjective image of rural settlements will be presented and confronted to each other. These are: the analysis of freehand sketches and photographic essays. In the last part, the paper will discuss both methods showing designative and appraisive aspects of rural imagery on the example of two Polish villages and their cognitive and practical goals in studies of relations between people and their life space.*

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## 1 Introduction

The recent decades in social sciences represent a real theoretical and methodological revolution, manifested above all by the interest in culture in different contexts and dimensions. All the transformations that took place in this period are often described as ‘cultural turn’. The number of undertaken research problems by anthropologists, sociologists, geographers is so huge, that it is difficult to create transparent classification of these studies. The most common theme for their works is the reference to everyday life, as a specific interpretation of the social life. Different disciplines describe and interpret everyday life in relations to its different symptoms. One of them is looking for meanings, which are assigned by people in the process of perception and structuring their neighbourhoods through the scope of their culture and experience (ROSE 2001). The key element of spatial experiences and perceptions is the visual sphere. The character of images that surround us and their social perception is, according to many scientists, an important element of the cultural process for constructing social life of the Western civilisation and constitutes an element for wider analysis of the society transformation from pre-modernity to modernity, and later from modernity to post-modernity (ROSE 2001). Images carry information, knowledge, emotions, aesthetic feelings, values. According to P. SZTOMPKA (2005), they may be read as a text.

The aim of the following article is to present and interpret the image of the rural settlements remembered in the minds of inhabitants and reflected in a form of freehand sketches and photographic essays. The issue of perception and spatial images was initiated and developed mostly in cities. Regardless of the aspect of undertaken research for experiences and spatial remembering, works referring to the social perception of space in the countryside appeared later and were rather seldom. The ‘cultural turn’ in geographic research of rural areas is associated mostly with British works in the 1990s. Geographers started then to consider dimensions of ‘rurality’ and tried to put them in the context of traditional terms. That research concentrated on processes co-creating current meaning of ‘rurality’ especially different forms of spatial practices, which characterise the rural style of life (WOODS 2011).

Freehand sketches and photographic essays of rural settlements presented and interpreted in this article are examples of social representations of certain places, in other words they are specific forms of knowledge and construction of the countryside, which beside practices of rural localities (behaviours and activities with the local dimension and everyday lives) and specific experiencing of rural areas, are the concept element of the ‘threefold complexity’ of rural space by K. HALFACREE (2004), being the expression of contemporary multi-dimensional understanding of the ‘countryside’ and ‘rurality’. Space in the perspective of social representations is experienced every day and is a subject to structuration in human minds, according to guidelines of social constructivism.

## 2 Theory and methods

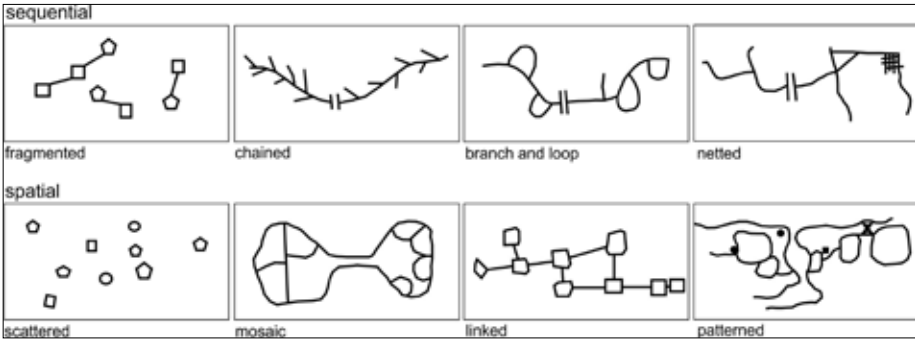
The pioneer for research concerning space images was K. LYNCH (1960), who developed and applied the method of freehand sketch analysis – a graphic form of reconstructing spatial knowledge mostly based on visual perception. According to K. LYNCH (1960, p. 131), “shaping spatial images is a dual process between the observer and the observing object. What the observer notices is an external form, but the way it is interpreted and paid attention to this form, influences what the observer really sees.” Besides the issue of attributes of space allowing their easy identification by a human being, K. LYNCH (1960) paid great attention to the meanings of individual places and objects being the effect of their practical and emotional evaluation. On the basis of research carried out in three cities, i.e. Boston, New Jersey and Los Angeles, he distinguished five elements, which make up the image of urban areas’ physical structure, that is:

- 1) Paths, which are described as channels that the people move along. These can be streets, sidewalks, bicycle paths or railway lines. In the image structure of many people this is the dominant element because they observe the city while moving along these paths, whereas the remaining elements are added to the sketches and remain in close spatial relation with paths.
- 2) Nodes are defined as objects, which can be entered, or which constitute strategic points serving navigation and orientation in the city. These could be street crossings, roundabouts, transit points in public transport, bus or tram terminus. Nodes can be significant ‘events’ while moving along paths, therefore their concept is strongly connected to the concept of the first element distinguished by the author. At the same time, they often indicate the centre of areas, therefore their role is very significant in the shape of the city’s image.
- 3) Edges usually constitute some kind of barrier, space limitations or distances between areas, though in some cases they connect with each other. These are most often waterfronts, walls, railway dykes, rivers.
- 4) Areas constitute medium or large units with individual character distinguished in the city space. Besides paths, they are the second element, which can dominate sketches prepared by respondents. According to K. LYNCH (1960), this depends not only on the individual features, but also on the city space.
- 5) Landmarks are, similar to nodes, waypoints used in navigation in the city. Usually they are constituted by buildings, signs or other urban details, which fill up imagination of most users of the city space. Part of them can have a local character, part – especially, if they tower over the buildings of the whole city thanks to their size, determines the perceptive dominant – and become a symbol.

Analysis of freehand sketches presented by K. LYNCH (1960) initiated the so called structural (descriptive) aspect for research of city space imagination connected with their physical structure as well as relations of subjective image with reality. Both quantitative as well as qualitative analysis were subject to content, internal structure and style of sketches, but also their spatial range and orientation according to the directions of the world. K. LYNCH (1960) indicated two elementary features in the landscape of the city significant to the process of constructing sketches and final shape of these images: (1) legibility, which means ease, with which respective parts of the city are recognised and organised in consistent picture and (2) imageability – specific feature of the city combining physical-spatial elements with events in the social life and personal experiences of people taking place in these elements (LYNCH 1960).

The method of freehand sketches' analysis by K. LYNCH (1960) was broadened with the proposal of their classification by D. APPELYARD (1970). On the basis of analysis for the sketches' structure and their level of accuracy, he arranged sketches in groups according to similarity and in sub-groups according to other specific features. In this way, he distinguished their linear and spatial type. Sketches with the dominance of linear elements (paths, nodes, edges), were divided into fragmented, chained, branch and loop as well as netted. Among sketches with the dominance of spatial elements (landmarks, areas) he distinguished scattered, mosaic, linked sketches as well as a map (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: **Types of sketch maps of cities**



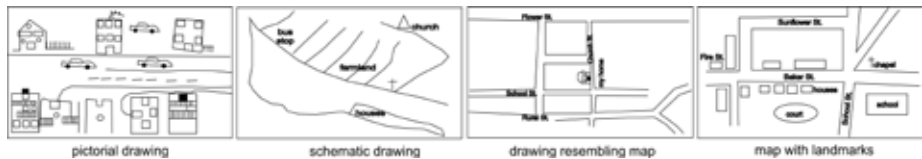
Source: APPELYARD 1970

Another proposal of sketch typology was presented by F.C. LADD (1970). The author did not ask respondents to draw the whole city, but only the area around the place where they lived, their neighbourhood. As a result, she obtained sketches with much lower spatial range, but at the same time much more detailed and often much more resembling the drawing, which presents the typical city landscape rather than a

map. Among the sketches of the neighbourhood, F.C. LADD (1970) distinguished the following four types:

- 1) pictorial drawings, which most often presented a street;
- 2) schematic drawings, which included information about streets, areas, but the way of presentation was rather general;
- 3) drawings resembling map, which could serve as a map and help in the orientation on a particular area, but included a small number of elements;
- 4) maps with landmarks, which allowed to recognise the neighbourhood and could help to find yourself in the area (Fig. 2).

**Figure 2: Types of sketch maps of neighbourhoods**



Source: LADD 1970

It seems that besides different classification of freehand sketches, which resulted from the various scale of mapped fragments of space by the respondents, the content of imaginative maps in all cases refers to the proposal of K. LYNCH (1960), so it is possible to distinguish paths, landmarks, nodes, areas and edges in them, which make up the image of a structure for specific fragment of space – no matter if the whole city was drawn or just a part of it. This paper presents an attempt for analysis and interpretation of freehand sketches of rural areas invoking to the image elements distinguished by K. LYNCH (1960) and, due to the scale of researched settlement units, classification of neighbourhood sketches proposed by F.C. LADD (1970).

Images of rural settlements in the form of freehand sketches will be collated with the image of villages presented in photographic essays, prepared by inhabitants. Every essay constituted identification of places with different characteristics, determined in advance, i.e.: ‘beautiful place’, ‘ugly place’, ‘place, which tells the story of the village’, ‘place, which creates positive emotions’, ‘place, which creates negative emotions’, ‘place, where the time passes slowly’, ‘place, where the time passes fast’, ‘place, where the time stands still’, and ‘my place’, which determination was left to the people preparing their essays. Photographs of certain places were accompanied by explanations of their choices in the form of short descriptions. According to Y.-F. TUAN (1987) “places constitute centres of sensed values”. The collection of significant places, connected with granting the space a symbolic dimension in the individual as well as collective sense makes up the notion of cultural space in contemporary human geography (LISOWSKI 2003).

Similar research concerning evaluation of the space of the whole city was conducted in Łódź (TOBIASZ-LIS & WÓJCIK 2013). Among numerous advantages of this method for people taking part in the research, most often was emphasised the ease and the possibility of individual interpretation of space while taking photographs, which is difficult to reach during standard social surveys. At the same time, the results showed, that besides subjectivity of feelings and assessment of certain places by individuals, most images can be interpreted as an illustration of typical impressions, average for all the participants of the survey (OKAMATO et al. 2006; TOBIASZ-LIS & WÓJCIK 2013).

Research of space features, with the use of photographic methods, assumed that they show relations between the photographer and the surrounding space, therefore the researcher can try to interpret subjective images and meaning of places in their individual and collective contents. Similar assumptions were made earlier in the analysis of freehand sketches. According to concepts for perception of space formulated by geographers (SAARINEN 1969; BARTNICKA 1989), firstly – there is an objective, external world in relations to an individual, secondly – there is a separate, subjective entity mind and thirdly – there is a possibility to discover the perceived, sensual-mental world, known as the image.

### **3 Imaginative geographies of rural settlements – different methods, common results**

Research concerning images of rural settlements with the use of freehand sketches and photographic essays was conducted in eleven villages located in the voivodships of Łódź [województwo łódzkie], Masovia [województwo mazowieckie] and Greater Poland [województwo wielkopolskie], which were characterised by diverse genesis, physiognomy and economic functions. Selection of people participating in the research had a quota character. It was attempted to retain proportions of elementary socio-demographic features of the population of individual settlements, such as age, sex and education. A small number of respondents – several people in every village, was justified for the reason of the elementary target of conducted research, which was the initial exploration of phenomena, as well as its qualitative character (BABBIE 2004). Inhabitants were asked to prepare freehand sketches of the village in a way that would present surrounding, including the most important elements of space according to them. Then, they were also asked to take photographs of places described as beautiful and ugly, where the time passes slowly and fast, where the time has stopped, places telling the story of the village, places evolving good and bad feelings and places important for them.

Irrespective of the character and specific features of individual villages, and the socio-demographic features of people taking part in the conducted research, their images in the form of freehand sketches of the nearest area were different and can be classified to all types distinguished and described in literature by F.C. LADD (1970) – starting from pictorial, presenting only the most important parts of settlements, and finishing with maps with orientation points, which reflected whole villages, indicating and naming neighbouring areas at the same time.

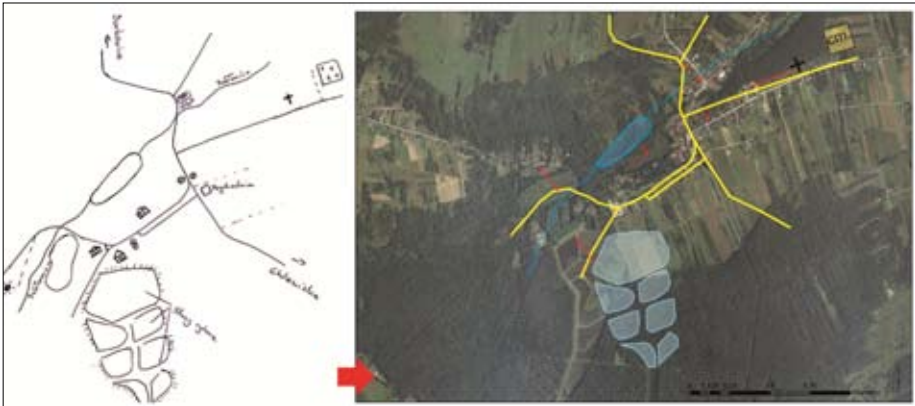
Types of village sketches, their shape, structure and content can be interpreted in the context of two fundamental issues – (1) size, character of development and functions of the village, especially the quality of social infrastructure and (2) strategy for making sketches adapted by individual people participating in the research. In the first case – the bigger diversification, the richer images, taking the shape of expanded schematic sketches, sketches resembling a map or maps with landmarks. In the case of strategy for drawing up sketches one should refer to the classification of imaginative maps of G. RAND (1969 after MORDWA 2003), who distinguished sketches of the “taxi driver” type – presenting fragments of space, including sets of roads resulting from every day, individual experiences – in this case the main road in the village and the most important objects located along, as well as sketches of the “aeroplane pilot” type – more abstract and internally integrated, covering in this case bigger parts or even whole villages.

Examples of sketches of the Rzuców village located in Borkowice commune, in the Przysucha District [powiat przysuski], in the Masovia Voivodship are presented below. It is a rather extensive, multipath village with an irregular set of roads where buildings are distributed chaotically. However, unlike other rural settlements, which were the subject of the research, people did not draw sketches representing Rzuców starting only from the main road. Further distinctive features of this settlement constituting all sketches were the river Jablonica over which the village developed and ponds. Their legibility reflected in well oriented and not distorted images of this settlement (Fig. 3). Also, these linear elements were like a backbone for the people preparing sketches and made it easy for them to draw accurately nodes and landmarks presenting important places of individual and collective importance in every day experience of rural living here. People included and often highlighted their family houses and houses of relatives or friends and objects with important social functions, i.e. the school, the shop, the fire station, the church, the cemetery, the doctor’s practice. Apart from these, also the village’s industrial functions, since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, may be read from sketches presenting “the factory” or “the foundry”. Interestingly, especially in the perspective of contemporary socio-economic changes of the Polish countryside, it seems rather rare to draw farmlands, which appeared only in every tenth sketch and mostly served the function of ‘filling’ the empty space on the checker (Fig. 4).

Analysis of the presented sketches confirms that the perception of space consists in the first place in identification, that is recognising the components of environment

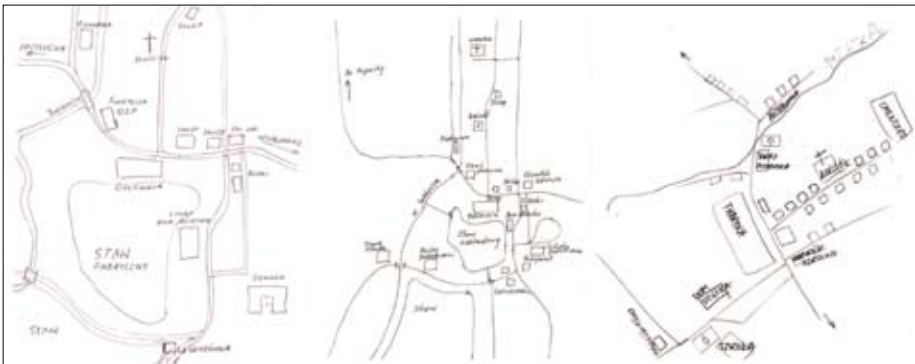
and distinguishing some elements from others, their structuration, that is defining the spatial relation between components of environment as well as on evaluation, that is defining meanings of individual elements for the perceived entity.

Figure 3: **Spatial distortions of the sketch map of the Rzuców village (Borkowice Commune, Przysucha District, Masovia Viovodship)**



Source: own research

Figure 4: **Examples of sketch maps of the Rzuców village (Borkowice Commune, Przysucha District, Masovia Viovodship)**



Source: own research

Rural settlements represented by the inhabitants in photographic essays constitute significant deepening of space images included in freehand sketches and allow for more comprehensive interpretation of meanings given and read in specific places as a result of their everyday experiencing. Some parts of the village become more clear, legible, create both positive and negative emotions among inhabitants, which is the

basis for their evaluation. Photographic essays constitute an image of individual 'micro worlds' and presents connection of inhabitants of the village with important places and objects for them, where their lives and the lives of all local communities is organised. In the interpretation of individual places, it is possible to feel harmonious coexistence of the human world, natural world and things strengthened in rural areas, which was also mentioned in the research of rural settlements in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship [województwo świętokrzyskie] by E. SZOT-RADZISZEWSKA (2013).

Below correlated parts of one of the photographic essays of Popielawy village, located in Rokiciny commune, in the Tomaszów Mazowiecki District [powiat tomaszowski], in the Łódź Voivodship,, are presented (Fig. 5). Among others, such parts were chosen, which not only referred to specific places and their meaning for the author of the essay, but also to the experienced time, which similar to space is a natural aspect of human existence. People not only stay in a particular length of time, but time temporalises in lives of people and in the human culture.

- Place, which tells the story of a village: "This is the only wooden cross in the neighbourhood. It was made from the larch wood in 1825. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the whole village was hit by cholera. (...) Many people died then. The only hope was in God. (...) Villagers, as a gratitude to God for saving their lives, decided to construct a cross, which was to symbolise a new beginning. The villagers still care for the cross. It is still decorated with flowers. The story of the disease is carried along."
- Place, which creates positive emotions: "Family home is a special place for everyone. It is connected with many memories. I always feel safe and happy there. With time, I observe that everything is changing around, but the house remains the same. (...) I am happy to be living away from noise, close to a quiet road and beautiful neighbourhood."
- Place, which inspires me: "My grandfather is a beekeeper. He looks after them all year round. You have to take great care about those hard working insects. They require much attention, so that you can collect the first honey already in spring. I admire bees, their hard work and organisation skills. Such small creatures, yet they are able to collect nectar from flowers and transform it in delicious and healthy honey. I like to come to the garden and watch my grandfather looking after them. It is really incredible, how they are able to cooperate with each other. Thanks to them and my grandfather's work I can always count on fresh honey."
- Place, where time passes fast: "For me field is a place, where time definitely seems to speed up. While working, we suddenly come to a conclusion that an hour or two have passed. Sometimes there is no time to rest and you have to work fast, because the rain is coming. At that time, everybody is trying hard to do all without checking the time."

- Place, where time passes slowly: “For many years I used to travel to school in Łódź. I always waited for a coach or a minibus. No matter if it snowed or rained I had to go. Unfortunately, the waiting time for transport was long, and the bus never came according to the schedule.”
- Place, where time stands still: “The windmill koźlak was built between 1947-48. After four years it was transformed into a mill, and such is its function until today. Presently it is in private hands. The mill is moved by an electric engine, and its production capacity was increased from 1.7 tons to 4 tons of grain per day. (...) As far as I remember it looked the same. As a child, I often watched the whole process of making flour. To this day nothing has changed. The mill resembles old times but it is still operational.”

Figure 5: **Places included in photographic essay presenting Popielawy village (Rokiciny Commune, Tomaszów Mazowiecki District, Łódź Voivodship)**



Source: own research

## 4 Conclusions

Freehand sketches and photographic essays presenting the spatial image of rural settlements are of great importance in the research of human life environment. As forms of the world structured in the mind, they fulfil many cognitive and practical functions – broadening the perspective of research with the issue of subjective space. Sketches and photographic essays of rural settlements allow to determine not only the character of images, but it is also possible to describe contemporary nature of ‘rural areas’ and ‘rurality’ thanks to included contents.

The cognitive function refers most of all to the interpretation of rural settlements as certain territories, where social processes take place. Fundamental difference in

shaping social environment of rural areas in relation to urban environment depends on the key role of neighbourhood in the reproduction of interpersonal relationships. In this case, the scale is important, as it refers to the image of material structure as well as the character of the relation between human and the environment, which is greatly based on the functional and social relationships between the 'middle' (in this case it is mostly the family home) and subsequent spheres of surrounding of the closer and farther neighbourhood.

The functional aspect includes the usefulness of environment and the ways of connecting individual spaces ('places') being the subject of everyday experiences. Village people, through sketch or photographs, show essentially forms of inhabiting rural areas (their homogeneousness or diversification), so that it is possible to conclude about the coherence or its lack in the architectural-landscape dimension. Connectivity is by contrast not only the function of homestead, farmhouse, allotment border, but mainly it is expressed by the image of common or public space and different types of institutions included in it.

The social aspect covers mostly the sphere of symbolism, which already results from the choice, and next, in the case of a sketch, from the size and the level of generalisation of certain elements. Institutions included in sketches or presented in essays should be then treated mainly as emanation of community life. They inform us about methods of social communication, and thanks to it we can obtain knowledge not only concerning the way of subjective reflection of space, but we also learn a lot about the sketcher and his/her connection with the life space.

The practical aspect of this way to study contemporary rural settlements has a big connection with spatial planning, especially in the conditions of a quick desagrarisation of rural areas. Sketches make us realise largely the disappearance of productive functions and thereby the marginalisation of the expanse role in shaping functional and social relations. The correct planning of rural areas should include the role of nature in creating rusticity. Harmony in the rural environment is the result of interactions between human and nature, which have different background (productive and non-productive). In order to retain the specificity of rural settlements it is important to plan open areas, which should serve the contemporary society in the same way as expanses before in sustaining biological and social needs of their inhabitants. In this case sketches and self-directed photographs may appear to be very helpful, especially to identify elementary problems of local planning connected with the issue of weakening social relationships, or legibility and imageability of elements for the spatial structure of rural areas, which are the sign of their contemporary, dynamic changes. We obtain therefore information on the subject of quality of everyday life space of individuals and places important both from the perspective of individual experiences and from the experiences of all local communities.

Inhabitants taking part in the conducted research paid attention to the fact that both drawing a sketch and preparing a photographic essay allowed them to observe

more closely the surrounding space and everyday life of their community. From the research perspective, obtained images of rural settlements in this way constitute recording and perpetuation of certain visual facts in a specific time-space context, illustrate concepts, categories and regularity of social reality, but are also a heuristic inspiration and a foundation for wider interpretation of social space and cultural scenery of rural areas.

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