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DOCUMENTING A CENTURY-OLD FARMHOUSE IN FILIPY, WYSZKI COMMUNE, NORTH-EASTERN POLAND

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Abstract

In November 2018, and October 2021, a series of field surveys were conducted in *gmina Wyszki* (Wyszki commune) in northeastern Poland, some 60 km southwest of the region's capital city of Białystok, to identify any remnants of vernacular architecture that may have historical or cultural value. In particular, a century-old log house in Filipy was selected for more detailed research. Photographs and inventory drawings were taken to document not only the architectural form and construction of the house, but also its furnishing, equipment and interior adornments. It was the accumulative nature of the house's interior that proved crucial to its cultural value.

Keywords: vernacular architecture; farmhouses; northeastern Poland

INTRODUCTION

While living in such an unprecedented period of both local cultural fluctuation and global change, and being more and more involved in hastening the speed of changes, we may experience a need for culture anchors. In the past, architecture anchored culture. For example, Vitruvian *firmitas* meant desirable solidity and permanence of construction that helped buildings to endure eternally.

In more recent times, old buildings were assumed to deserve attention and conservation, even if constructed with impermanent materials and fragile constructions. Especially at the present age of information, it is neither durable materials nor indestructible construction, but rather cultural significance, that makes buildings worthy to be preserved for descendants, or at least commemorated.

Architectural heritage protection is good, but its documentation is better

In general, documentation rather than protection and maintenance might be preferred for old verna-

cular timber architecture, as the latter does not ensure buildings to be safe and resistant to the passage of time. For example, in 1994, the Białystok Village Museum (now the Podlaskie Folklore Museum, an open air museum in northeastern Poland) was partially taken by fire, resulting in the destruction of nine old wooden buildings and partial damage of the tenth one. And if any open air museum building is at risk of fire or decay, how much more at risk are other wooden buildings?

Therefore, projects that document wooden architecture have become an urgent need. The most recent one is the *Endangered Wooden Architecture Programme* (EWAP), established in 2021, hosted by Oxford Brookes University in collaboration with CyArk, and funded from Arcadia, a charitable fund run by Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin¹. As we were completing this article, the second edition of the EWAP was in progress.

In addition, a number of projects documenting minor wooden architecture have been carried out in many countries and under the auspices of a variety of

¹ See <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/research/units/tde/projects/endangered-wooden-architecture-programme/>.

institutions, including universities: the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, for example, included course No. 3DTD317 *Poland: Documenting Historic Wooden Architecture*, in its curriculum. There have also been ‘wooden architecture documentation camps’ (the most recent in Finland, Russia and Poland), conferences and workshops on evidencing wooden cultural assets, etc. In the past, documentation of wooden architecture was also included in some EU research grants, such as the *Wooden Architecture: Traditional Karelian Timber Architecture and Landscape* (2012–2014) under the auspices of the EU 7th Framework Programme².

Scope

Responding to such an urgent need for the documentation of wooden vernacular architecture, we are continuing earlier collective efforts in the Podlaskie Voivodeship in northeastern Poland, aimed at selecting and documenting the most valuable old wooden buildings in the region.

Northeastern Poland, and especially eastern Podlachia, still abound in old wooden architecture. Podlachia is a cultural borderland where the ranges of Eastern and Western Slavic ethnoses, as well as the influence of Eastern and Western Christianity, intermingle. Old wooden buildings are still present in the villages inhabited by the East Slavic population of Belarusian-Ukrainian origin. However, villages inhabited by the Polish population, especially the descendants of the former petty gentry, have undergone profound changes, and some no longer have any old wooden houses at all. The latter have evolved from possessing a regional identity to a common cosmopolitan identity, in terms of culture, aesthetics, and space. The evolution of such villages has obliterated their landscape and cultural values.

However, as a result of a series of field surveys in November 2018 and October 2021, we still found a village with relatively well-preserved old wooden buildings, even though the village is ethnically Polish and genetically petty gentry. This is the hamlet of Filipy in Wyszki commune, in the central-southern part of Podlaskie Voivodeship. A century-old log farmhouse was selected for more detailed research. Photographs and inventory drawings of the house were taken to document not only its architectural form, but also its furnishings, equipment and interior decorations. Indeed, it

was the accumulative nature of the house’s interior that proved crucial to its cultural value. The purpose of the article is therefore to record and preserve the knowledge of this house prior to its demolition.

Methods

As the aim of the work was to consolidate knowledge of the architecture, furnishings, decoration and use of the house as comprehensively as possible, we chose the method that seemed most appropriate for this task. The choice was preceded by a comparison of the various methods available.

In past centuries, property inventories were the most common way of describing the architecture and furnishings of country houses. Descriptive inventory of a property is a method perfected over hundreds of years, enabling comprehensive documentation of a building and its interior³.

Nowadays, graphical methods, i.e. drawing and photography, are preferred. These can be divided into the following categories: realistic representations (photographs, photorealistic visualisations), technical drawings (architectural inventory drawings, construction drawings) and symbolic drawings (diagrams, sketches).

Our intention was to combine various types of visual representation, i.e. photographic, technical and artistic, into a coherent and comprehensive set of information about of the farmhouse in Filipy. Preferring the visual message, we supplemented it with text description only when necessary. Similar visual methods were used by Aleksandra Woszczenko and Jarosław Szewczyk [2016], Agata Antoniuk et al. [2018], Marcin Ładny and Jarosław Szewczyk [2019], Paula M. Brzozowska et al. [2019], Magdalena Bogdziewicz et al. [2022].

The farmhouse was documented with about 100 photographs in 2018 and 70 photos in 2021. The collection of photos has also been supplemented with 2D drawings that displayed ethnography-related data, to make documentation holistic (fig. 16–24). Similarly, a 3D model served as a backbone for integrating construction, architectural and ethnography-related visual information (fig. 13–15).

Such a holistic documentation method that used a 3D model to integrate ethno-cultural information with technical data was derived from similar documentary works by Agata Antoniuk et al. [2018] and Paula M. Brzozowska et al. [2019]. Moreover, the “decon-

² Coordinated by Università Degli Studi di Firenze; the grant agreement 269185, the specific programme call FP7-PEOPLE-2010-IRSES.

³ According to Krzysztof Ślusarek and Volodymyr Dolinovskyi [2021, p. 35], “property inventories, which document movable and immovable assets, have significant cognitive value, as they enable the comprehensive investigation of many aspects of human activity. It is no wonder then that they are a source often used by (...) arts historians and architects.”

structed model” method by Marcin Ładny and Jarosław Szewczyk [2019] was taken into account, although it was not directly applicable in this work.

Drawing and photographic inventory was supplemented by information obtained during interviews with villagers in October 2021. However, this information was incomplete and proved to be questionable in some cases.

1. THE CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

Marian Pokropek and Tomasz Strączek [1993] wrote the most comprehensive work on the folk architecture of the region. They described traditional types of settlement units, rural homesteads, dwellings and barns of the region, on the example of two hamlets, Piętki and Twarogi, some 35 km southwest of Filipy. They used specific Polish terminology with its basic distinction of village houses into two categories, broad-front houses and narrow-front houses, and stated that *“the houses of the asymmetric broad-front system were mostly directed with the side [short] wall towards the street, whereas those of the symmetric broad-front system were situated with the front (long) wall facing the street. (...) As for the asymmetric broad-front system houses, three types can be distinguished, each with a different position of the vestibule and the rooms, thus marking the front part of the building: i) houses with a through-vestibule or with two vestibules, one facing the street and the other facing the courtyard; ii) houses with two entrances (one to the large rooms, the other to the farm-vestibule and the kitchen); and iii) houses with a single entrance”* [M. Pokropek, T. Strączek 1993, p. 134]. They also described the interiors of the houses in Piętki and Twarogi: stoves and cookers, basic furnishings and interior decoration and the symbolic meaning of parts of these houses, such as doors and door sills, windows, corners and cornerstones, ceiling beams, etc. Customs related to the erection of the house, still alive in the 1980s, were also described, with focus on the two most important: the binding of ground beams, called *zakładziny*, and the finishing of rafter framing, called *wianek*.

As for the villages closer to Filipy, Helena Aramowicz et al. [2017] surveyed and described two old wooden houses in the village of Baranki, 10 km northeast of Filipy. Two other farmhouses in Lesznia, 8 km east of Filipy, were the subject of a work by Aleksandra Bednarska et al. [2017]. Most recently, Magdalena

Bogdziewicz et al. [2022] described and depicted an old farmhouse in Olszewo, 11 km southwest to Filipy. These farmhouses were of “broad-front system”, either asymmetric (Baranki, Olszewo) or symmetric (Lesznia). They all belonged to the descendants of the former Polish petty-gentry, because Baranki, Lesznia and Olszewo, as well as Filipy, had previously been inhabited by petty-gentry, exclusively. The selected houses in these villages have been documented and drawn with supplementary information on their adornment, equipment and furniture, materials and colours, current use, etc., because, as stated by H. Aramowicz et al. [2017, p. 282], *“they reflected in their layouts, equipment and decoration the history of the families who used to live there”*. In both cases, the owners did not make a deliberate effort to protect the traditional elements of spatial design, and yet in the houses there were preserved relics of the past, such as the careful arrangement and adornment of corners that were relics of the ‘sacred corner’, called *pokuć*; and the special aesthetic role of textiles (the fashion for decorative curtains and bedspreads came to the countryside in the first half of the 20th century from the towns).

The interiors of farmhouses from the Bielsk Podlaski area, east of Wyszki commune, were researched by Maria Parnowska [1961]. Although she focused on the dwellings of the East Slavic peasants, she also included several buildings from the western part of the area she surveyed, inhabited by Polish petty gentry.

2. LOCATION

Here, the subject being documented is a century-old farmhouse in a small hamlet called Filipy in Wyszki commune (*gmina Wyszki*⁴), in the Podlaskie Region (Podlaskie Voivodeship), of north-eastern Poland. We started documenting this farmhouse in 2018 and finished in December 2021, just before the building was pulled down.

2.1. The commune

Wyszki commune (*gmina Wyszki*) is located some 160 kilometres (99.4 mi) northeast of the Polish capital city of Warsaw and 50 kilometres (32 mi) southwest of the regional capital city of Białystok (Fig. 1). Wyszki commune, one of 2477 counties throughout the country, covers 206.5 square kilometres (79.7 sq mi) and is inhabited by some 5000 people, most of which are descendants of Polish petty gentry (*szlachta*).

⁴ In Poland, *gmina* is the principal unit of the administrative division.

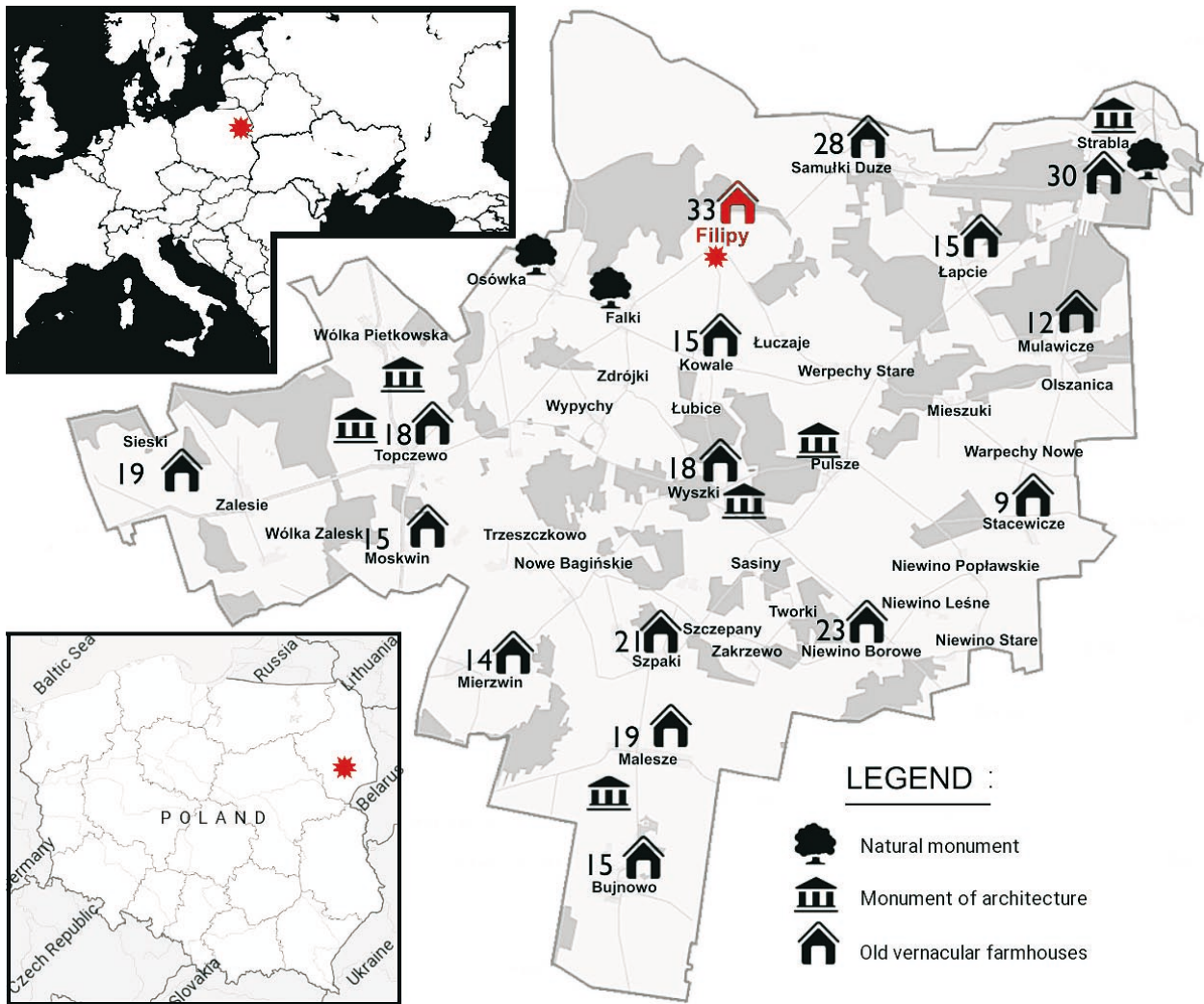


Fig. 1. A map of Wyszki commune and its placement in Poland and against a map of Europe; drawn by the authors, 2021

2.2. The hamlet

Some 6 kilometres (4 mi) north of Wyszki and 2 km (1.5 mi) south of the Narew river, there is a small hamlet called Filipy, inhabited by not more than 200 people (Fig. 2). Nevertheless, Filipy is one of the largest hamlets in the region, as the surrounding settlement system consists of a structure of very tiny hamlets of petty gentry origin. Amongst its 50–60 farmhouses, a few dozen are old wooden log houses which are still inhabited. Most of them have new façade cladding, modern furniture and a neutral interior design style, but a few have retained their old adornments and original furniture.

2.3. The farm

In the northern part of Filipy there is an old farm with four buildings: a storage barn, a cowshed, a pigpen and a house, scattered on a parcel 150 m long and 45 m wide (ca. 490 × 147 feet). Of those buildings, the house is the oldest one, dating back to the 1920s or so, while the other farm buildings were constructed after the Second World War.

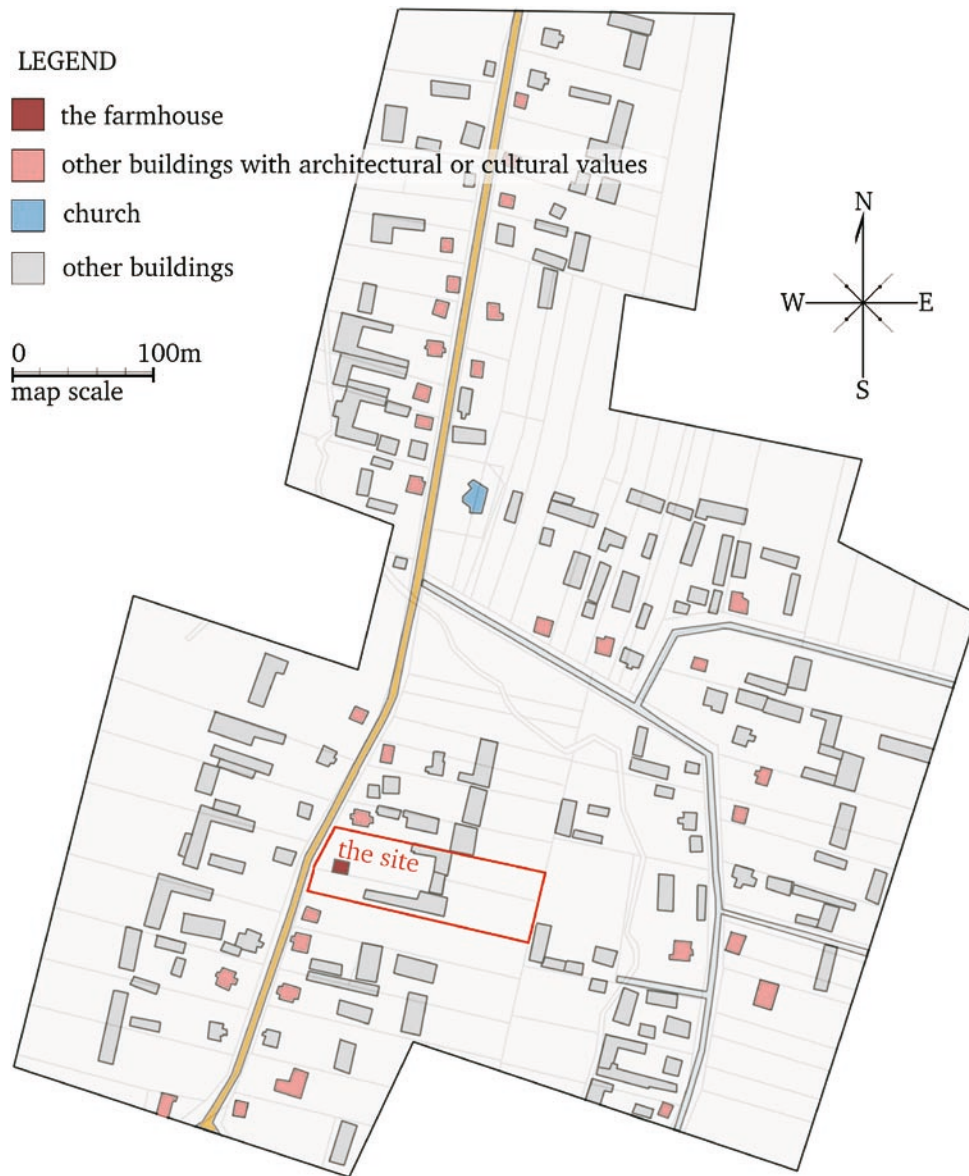


Fig. 2. A map of Filipy; drawn by the authors, 2021



Fig. 3. The plan map of the farm; drawn by the authors, 2021

3. THE FARMHOUSE

The farmhouse was built by its owners, Wincenty Łuczaj and his wife Antonina Łuczaj, in the 1920s, allegedly⁵. No original building documentation has survived.

3.1. Construction

Foundations were relatively shallow, made with field stones and concrete. Log wall construction with dovetail notchings was used. Sawed 10 by 6 inches (25 × 15 cm) pine logs were used for the walls. Ceiling beams were even thicker than the wall logs, 12 by 8 inches (30 × 20 cm) thick. The ceiling was insulated with a 10 cm thick layer of chaff with clay. A collar tie

construction supported the gable roof. The pitch of the roof was 40 degrees or 90%, or 11:12. Roof rafters were *circa* 8 by 6 inches (20 × 15 cm) to 7 by 7 inches (18 × 18 cm) thick.

3.2. Layout

The layout of the house was specific for this region, i.e. common for petty gentry old farmhouses in northeastern Poland. There was an asymmetrical arrangement of rooms which were all adjoined to the large tile stoves and an oven. An enfilade (room alignment) allowed one to pass through all the rooms, walking around the central stove-and-oven system (Fig. 4). From a hallway (*sierń*) one could enter the kitchen which



Fig. 4. The ground floor plan of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2021

⁵ Oral information by an anonymous villager, in October 2021.

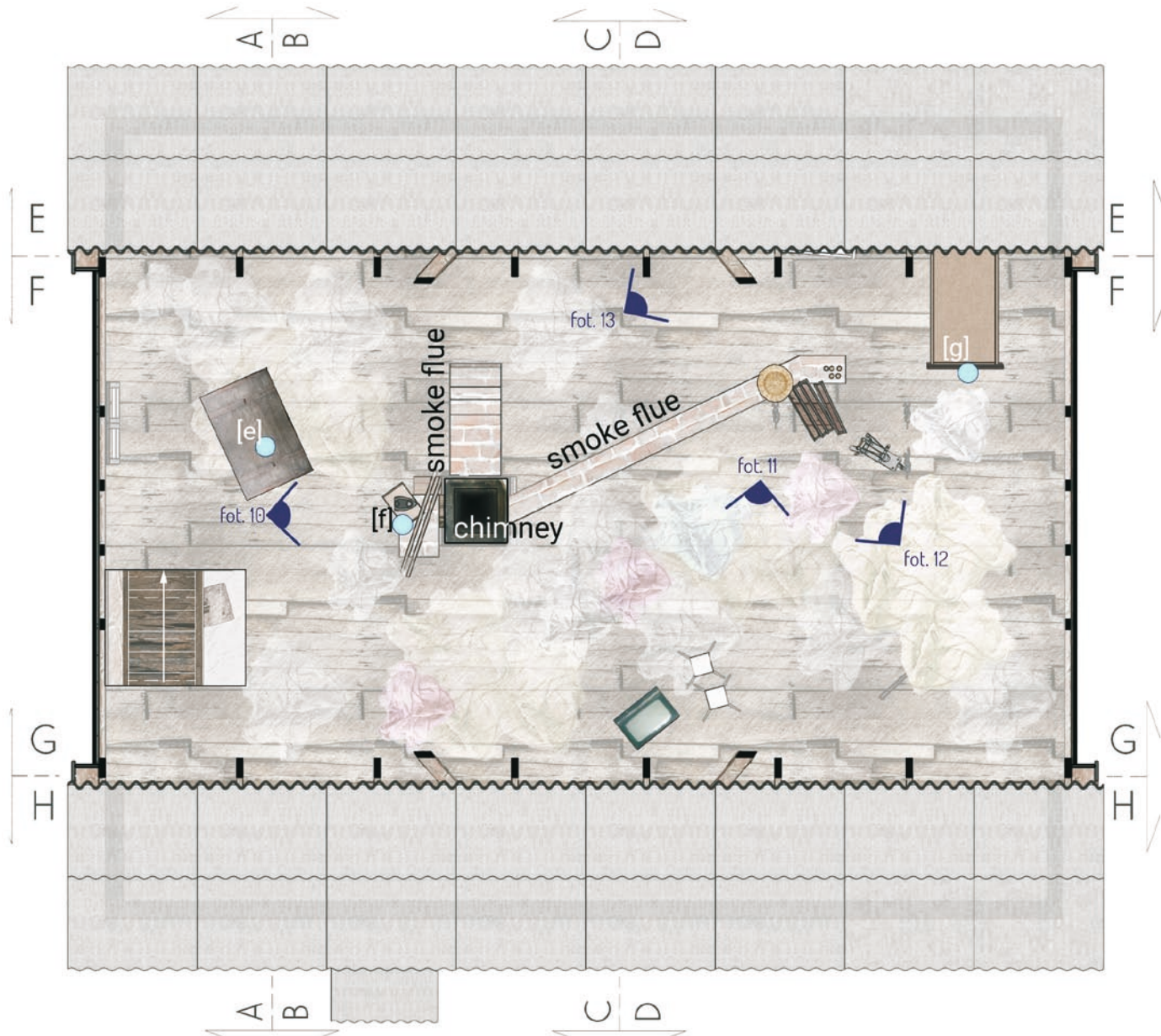


Fig. 5. The attic plan of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2021

also served as a main space for everyday activities and was used for both sleeping and dining, and for either labour or leisure. Therefore, in the kitchen one could find a Singer treadle sewing machine (Fig. 15), a bed, a dining table, etc.

The functional, aesthetic and symbolic arrangement of the kitchen was diagonal: the stove was located in the southeastern corner, while the opposite northwestern corner of the kitchen was of some sacred nature, containing devotional objects. Such a diagonal arrangement (stove corner vs. devotional corner) was common for old eastern European homes, including the old farmhouses in the eastern part of the Podlaskie Region.

Both the kitchen and an adjoining sleeping annex (called *walkierz* or *mały pokój*, i.e. “small sleeping chamber”; Fig. 7) had beds, thus forming a common sleeping zone in the farmhouse. Apart from the hallway, the kitchen and *walkierz*, there was also a fourth room, the largest and most festive one, called *wielka chata* (“large chamber”, literally “large cottage”). *Wielka chata* was not in common use except for circumstantial or ceremonial purposes, such as weddings, funerals or entertaining reputable guests. In 2018, when we started documenting this farmhouse, its largest room was no longer festive in terms of aesthetics and neatness. Actually, *wielka chata* was the first to deteriorate, despite its previous festive or ceremonial nature (Fig. 8).

The attic had not been converted into any habitable space, thus still serving as storage space or as a drying room, occasionally (Fig. 11, 12). Some attic space was occupied by a chimney system (Fig. 5, 11–15).

3.3. Stove and chimney

The well-developed stove system with kitchen oven included:

- an elongated wall-like brick stove that separated the living room from the sleeping annex (Fig. 4[d], Fig. 7);
- in the kitchen: a large, wide cookstove with an oven (Fig. 4[a], Fig. 6.1);
- a short “hanging chimney” that rested on a ceiling beam (Fig. 5[f]);
- a system of smoke flues that connected the stoves with the chimney (Fig. 5).

The “hanging chimney” and upper smoke flues in the attic floor are characteristic of north-eastern Poland, allowing for the operation of many stoves while only one short chimney was raised. Moreover, wooden bracket stakes (Fig. 12) stabilised, reinforced and buttressed the chimney, making it an aesthetic curiosity.

The kitchen cookstove reflects the historic evolution of stoves in the region. As shown in Fig. 7, the cookstove consisted of two main parts: an old “Rus-

sian stove” (*piec ruski*; Fig. 7: B), and a newer “English cooking device” (*angielka, kuchnia angielska*; Fig. 7: A).

The first part was of ancient origin and was specific for all old East European Slavic farmhouses, thus called “Russian stove” in ethnography literature. It consisted of a foundation platform with an “understove cache” (*podpiec, podpiecek*; Fig. 7: B3), a main brick stove body (Fig. 7: B2) with a baking oven inside (B1), and a sleeping platform at the top of the stove (*zapiec-cek*; B4). This part was constructed in the 1920s, just after erecting the building.

The second part was added later, allegedly in the 1930s or in the 1950s. It consisted of a tiled cookstove body with a hearth (A1) and an iron cooking plate placed above. Its name, “English cooking device” (*angielka*), refers to the fact that in the 18th century or later, iron cooking plates were introduced in Polish territories, being imported from England or being designed and made similarly to those already known in the British Isles.

The cookstove was supplemented with an exhaust hood (Fig. 7: A2) and short curtains (A2 and C2). Stove curtains were part of a traditional system of textile curtains that adorned all old homes. Not only stoves and windows, but also doors were adorned with such curtains (see C3 and C4).

The main kitchen stove had a system of switchable smoke flues that enabled various operating



Fig. 6. The kitchen; photos by the authors, 2018

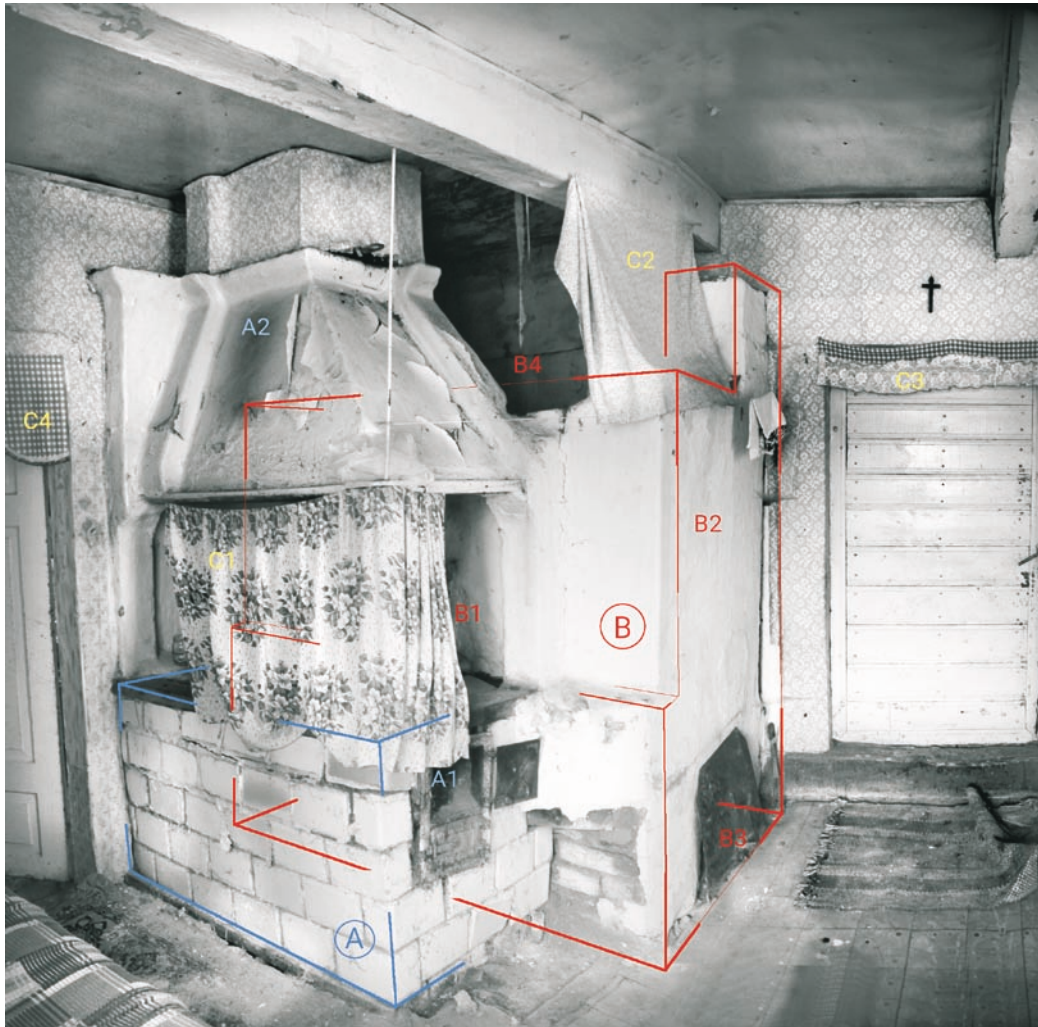


Fig. 7. The kitchen stove; source: the authors



Fig. 8. The sleeping annex (*walkierz*); photos by the authors, 2018



Fig. 9. The “large chamber”, being viewed from *walkierz*; photos by the authors, 2018



Fig. 10. The hallway (*sierń*); photos by the authors, 2018

modes: “winter mode” with maximum heating, “summer mode” with no heating, and “baking mode”. Four cast iron dampers allowed users to switch these modes on or off.

3.4. Interior furnishing and aesthetics

In 2018 only two rooms retained their complete furniture and aesthetic arrangements in the farmhouse; namely, the kitchen and the sleeping annex, *walkierz*. Their aesthetics were of a cumulative nature: the stoves and doors dated back to the 1920s, a sewing machine and some doors and furniture dated back to the 1930s and 1950s; other pieces of furniture and electronic devices were quite modern and new; all contributing to a unique melange of styles and items. Furthermore, the inner walls were whitewashed with lime in the 1920s, then painted in the 1930s (Fig. 10), then covered with wallpaper in the 1950s and then re-covered a few times; thus, one could see different furniture and various wall coverings that reflected the consecutive stages of interior redevelopment.

Traditionally, an important part of interior aesthetics of old farmhouses were various textiles: pieces of lace curtain, drapery, bedspread, tablecloth, tea cloth and other table-linen and kitchen towelry, as well as stove curtains (Fig. 6). While dilapidated and incomplete in 2018, the textiles still adhered to old vernacular home aesthetics.

3.5. Attic

The uninhabited attic was a storage space, sort of a “lumber room”, where one could find an old spinning wheel (Fig. 11: B), a loom dismantled into pieces (Fig. 11: A), an old smoothing iron (Fig. 11: photo 11), a few trunks or chests, outmoded furniture, baskets, old books etc.

The short “hanging chimney” (Fig. 12: A) was braced with four timber posts (Fig. 12: B) and the construction rested on three short logs (Fig. 12: C1, C2 and C3) that lay upon a ceiling beam, with no foundation or support beneath. The chimney was connected to stoves with three smoke flues: two short ones (Fig. 12: D) and one long one (Fig. 11: C).



Fig. 11. The attic with the longest smoke flue (C) exposed; photos by the authors, 2018



Fig. 12. The attic with two shorter smoke flues (D) exposed, and wooden braces (B) supporting the “hanging chimney” (A); photos by the authors, 2018

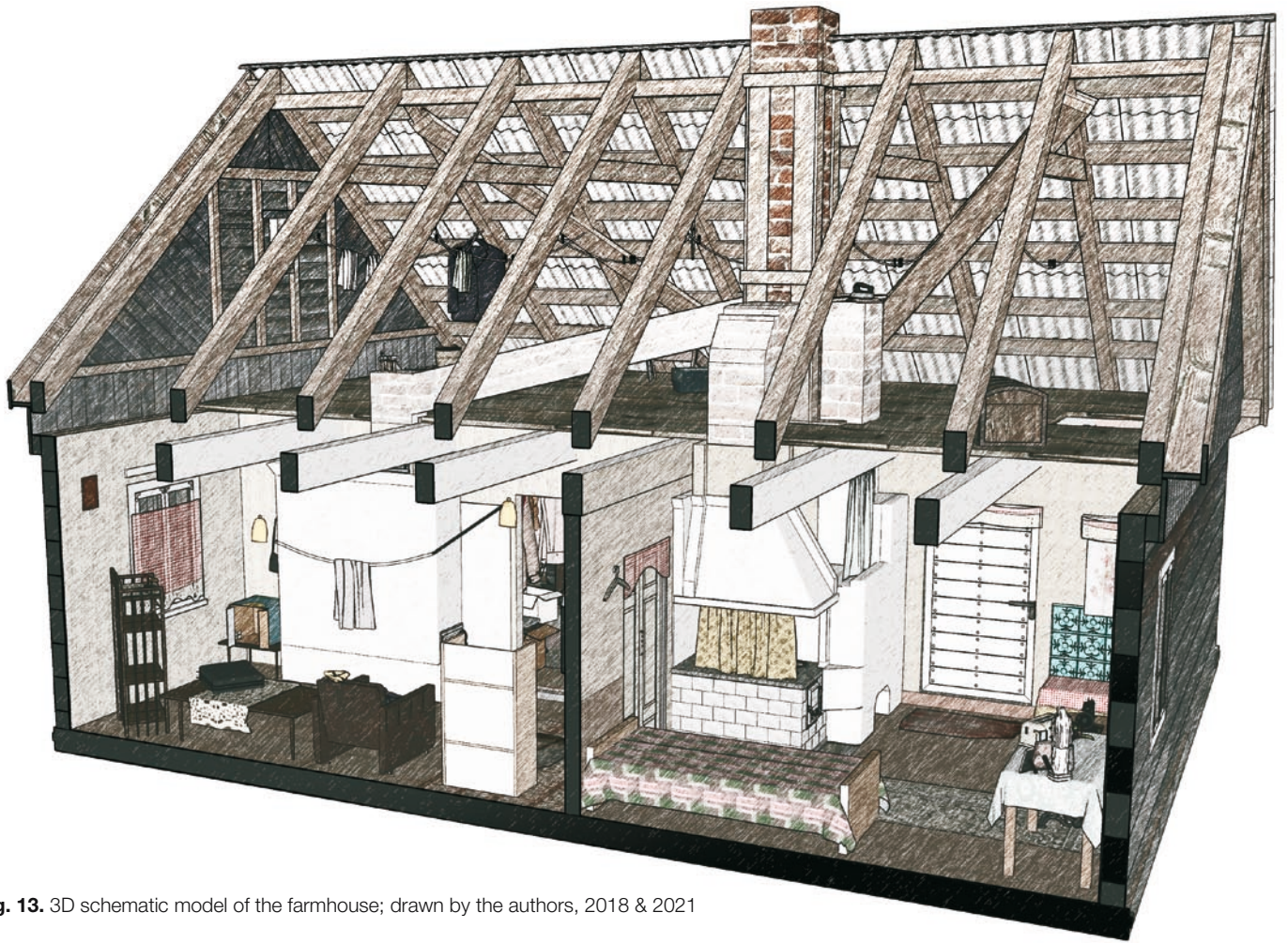


Fig. 13. 3D schematic model of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021

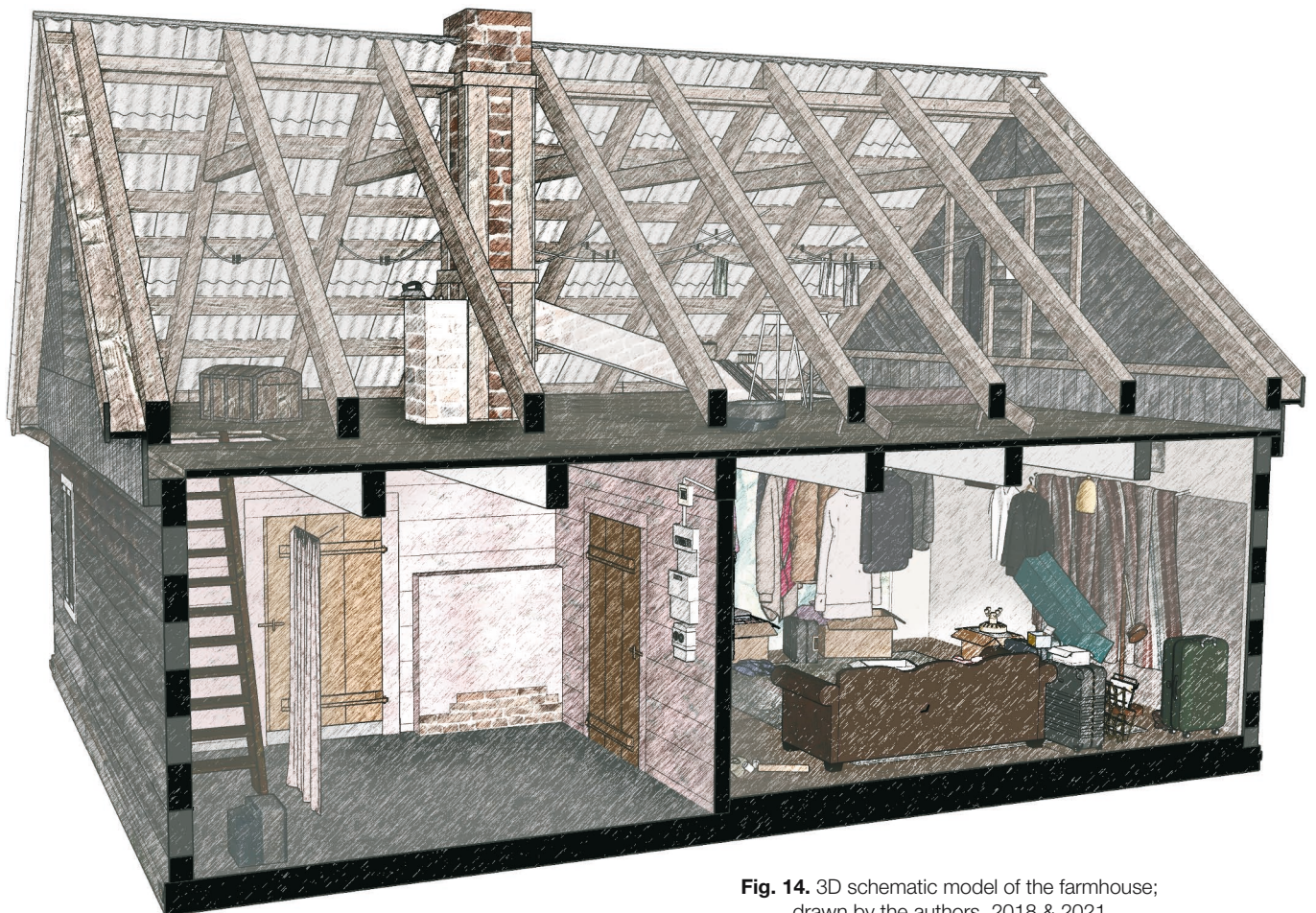


Fig. 14. 3D schematic model of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021

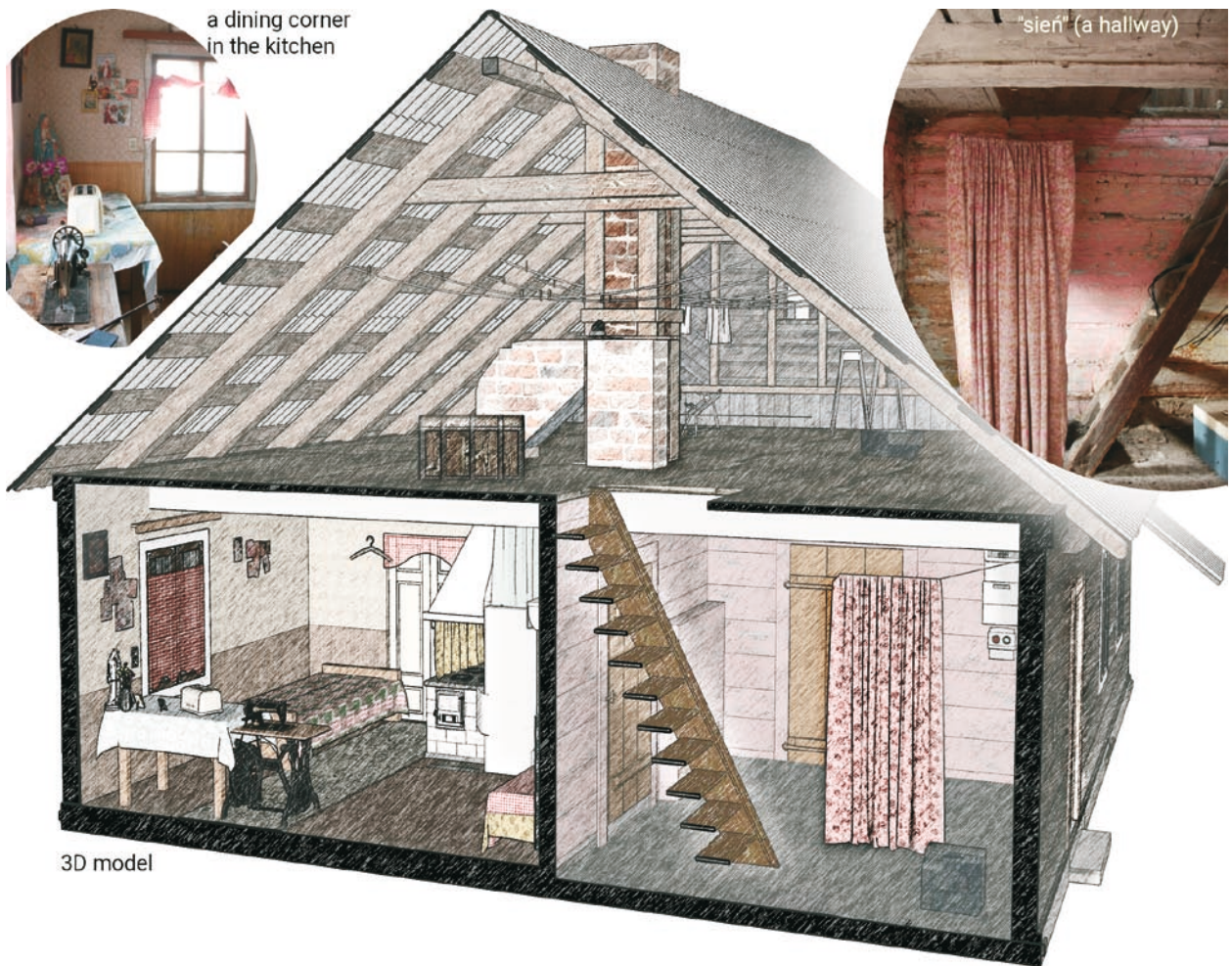


Fig. 15. 3D schematic model of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021



Fig. 16. A-A section of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021

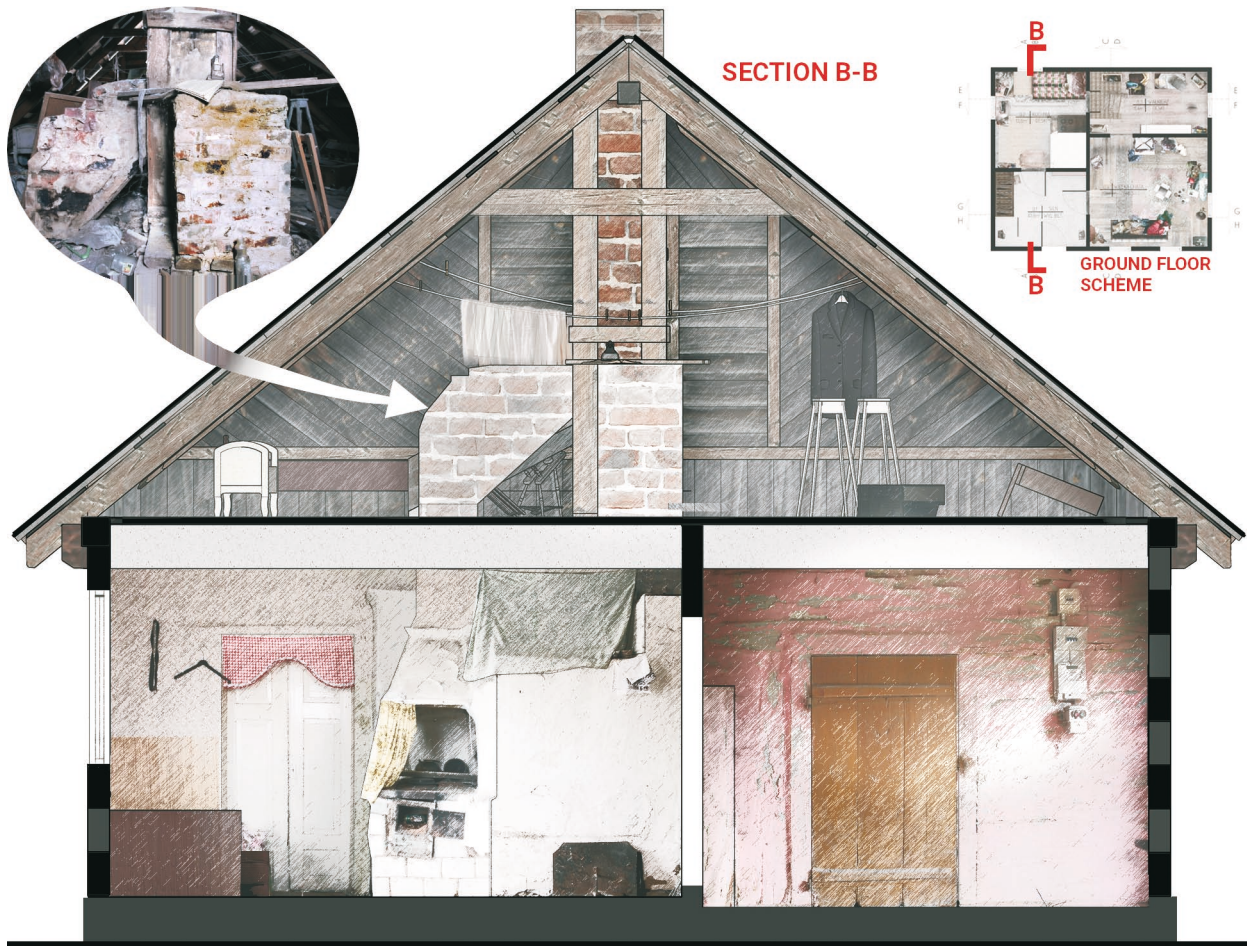


Fig. 17. B-B section of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021



Fig. 18. C-C section of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021



Fig. 19. D-D section of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021

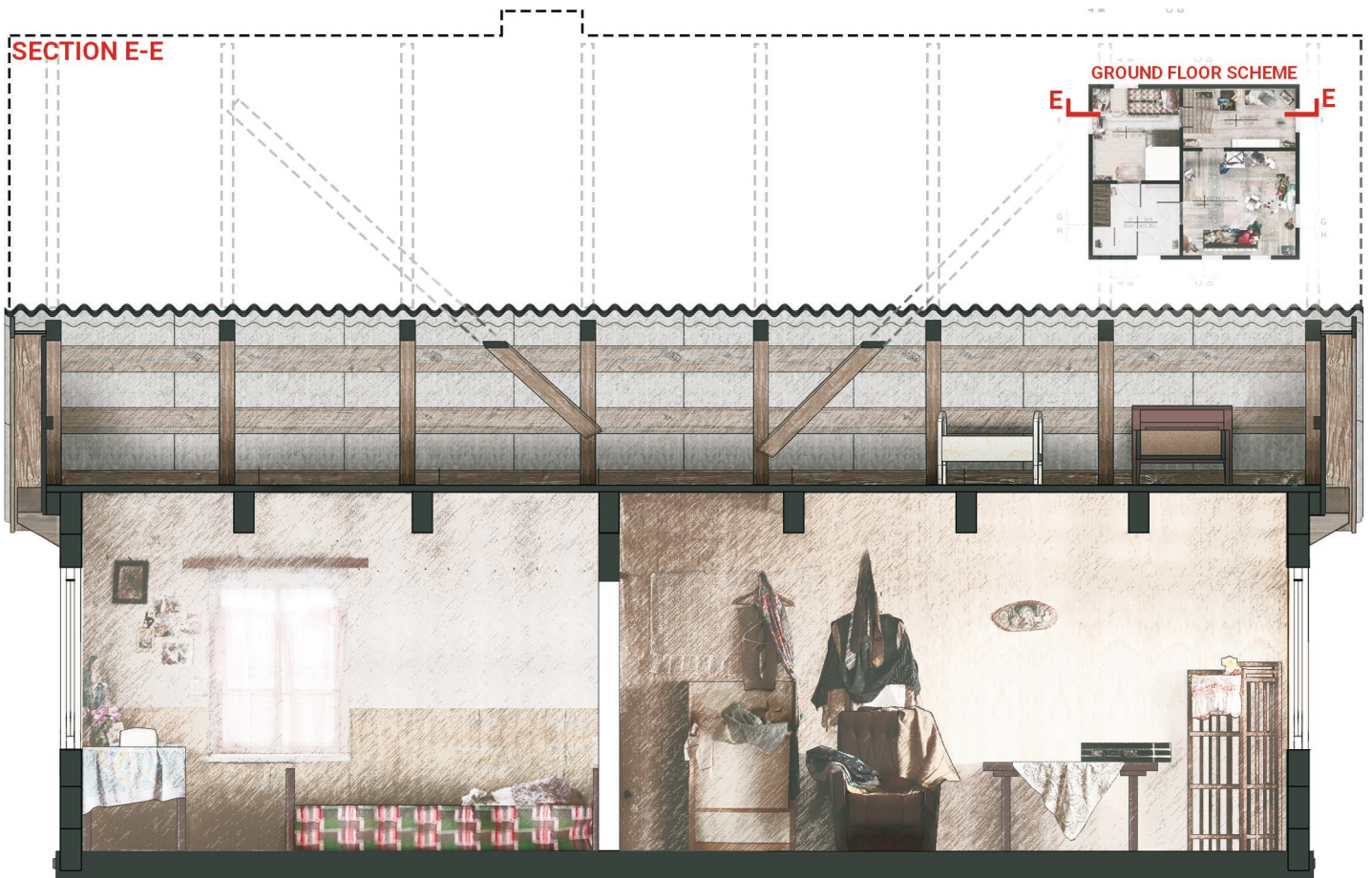


Fig. 20. E-E section of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021

SECTION F-F

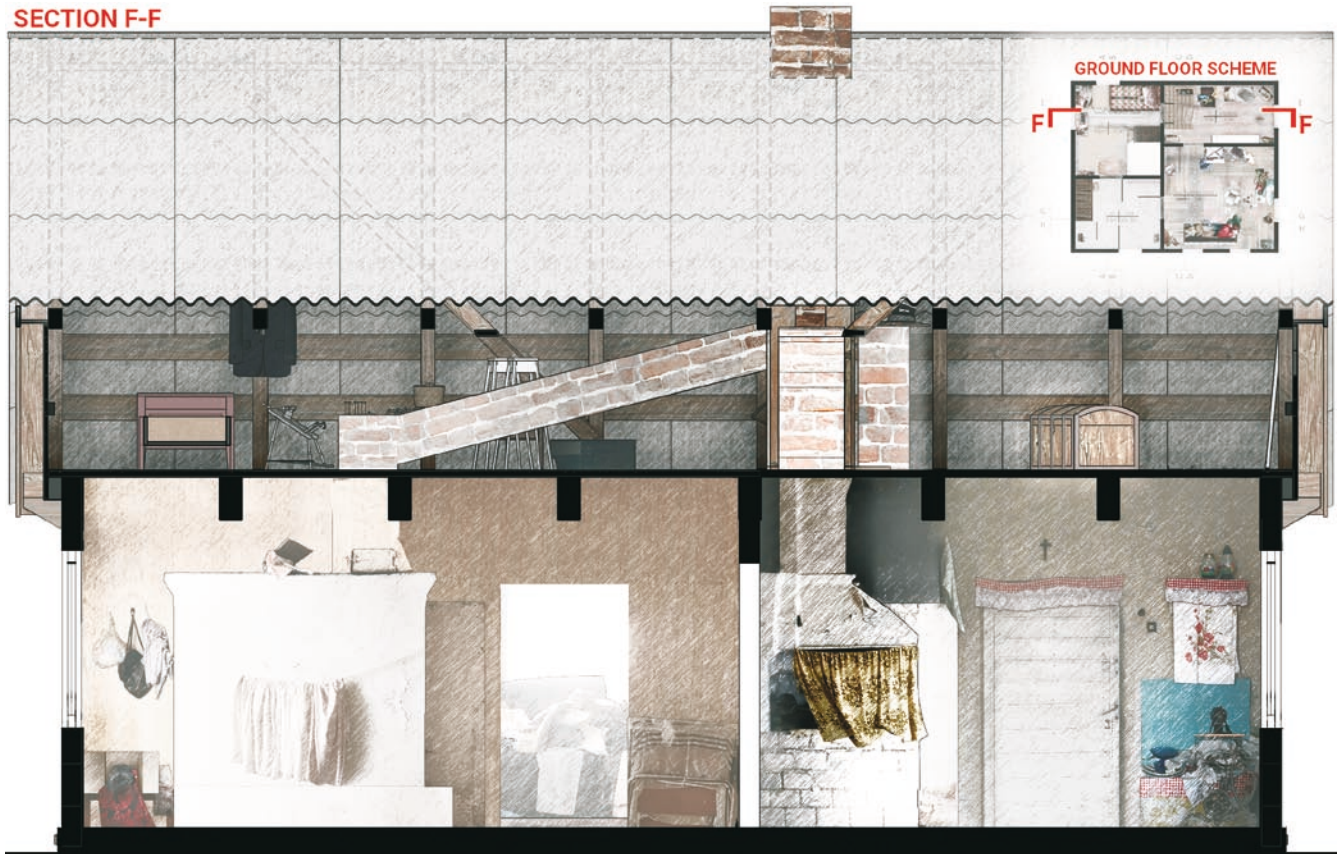


Fig. 21. F-F section of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021

SECTION G-G



Fig. 22. G-G section of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021



Fig. 23. H-H section of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018 & 2021



Fig. 24. Façades of the farmhouse; drawn by the authors, 2018



Fig. 25. The southern view of the farmhouse; photo by the authors, 2018

4. DISCUSSION

The interpretation of the drawing and factual data relating to the house may raise some ambiguities or concerns, as remarked below.

4.1. Reflections and questions regarding the farmhouse

As it has been stated above, an enfilade (room alignment) around the central stove-and-oven system was typical not only for many “asymmetric broad-front system” houses in the region [see M. Pokropek, T. Strączek, 1993], including the smallest and the most ancient types of log cabins (Fig. 26), but was also the basic scheme for more complex and larger layouts of many farmhouses erected in the mid-20th century until the late 1960s. So did the enfilade layout of the house under study grow out of old regional folk building traditions or, conversely, was it already a manifestation of a widely disseminated twentieth-century building culture?

The simplest (elementary) type of 19th-century log cabin, classified as of “asymmetrical broad-front layout”, provided a kind of “backbone” for later farmhouses that continued its line of development until the complete cultural paradigm shift in the late 1960s. This is also the case of the farmhouse in Filipy. However, in this case and in other houses of that type (in older farmhouses or even in somewhat newer ones) it is sometimes difficult to precisely define the ranges of influence, namely whether and to what extent the present (existing) layout, forms, furnishing and decoration of the

houses were influenced by old rural traditions, by town fashion (perhaps even of Jewish provenance), and to what extent – by foreign, cosmopolitan, or contemporary influences, fashions and patterns.

4.2. Reflections on the method

According to A. Antoniuk et al. [2018, p. 6], “it is only since the end of the 19th century that we have seen a systematic and in-depth reflection on the content and form of the drawing record of architectural information. (...) This reflection resulted, among other things, in either the acceptance or contestation of the basic division of drawing techniques for the transmission of architectural knowledge, i.e. the division into artistic and documentary drawing. Attempts to combine these two categories have not always been successful, although sometimes in the hand of a skillful illustrator they have resulted in clear, precise depictions that meet the criteria of both documentary and artistic drawing.”

More recently, further articles have been published in “Architecturae et Artibus”, whose authors have attempted to refine and to combine graphic and textual methods of recording architectural heritage knowledge related to historic wooden or clay houses [J. Szewczyk et al., 2024; A. Godlewska et al., 2022]. But, given the complexity of such information and including the multifaceted relations of the buildings to folk and national culture, it is still necessary to develop and examine the best possible methods of “academic writing and drawing”, to record architectural heritage.

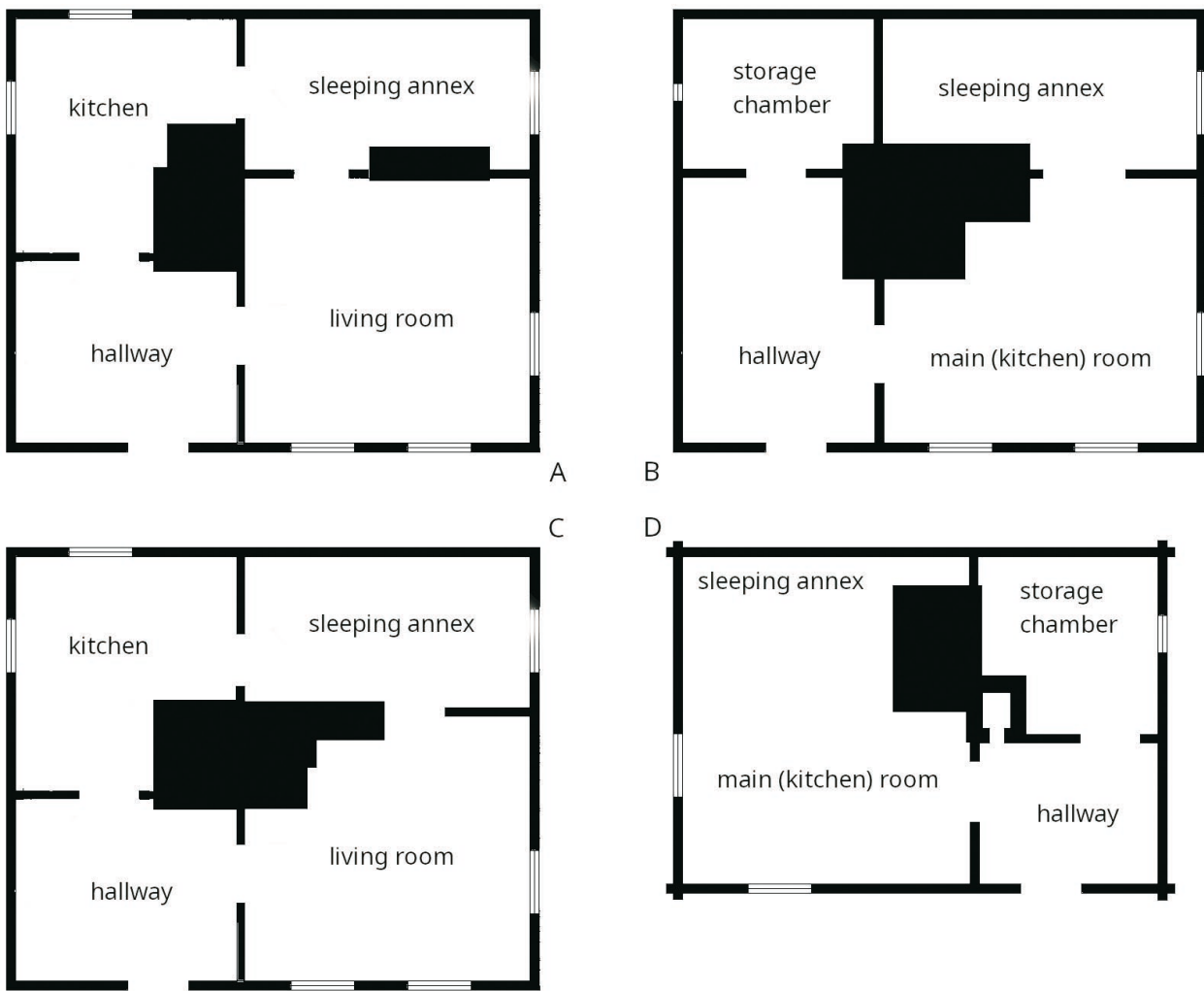


Fig. 26. The layout of the house in Filipy (A), as compared to other common layouts of old log houses in the region: B – an old house in Kiersnowo, according to Maria Parnowska [1961, p. 164], C and D – two simplest elementary types of a log cabin, in Piętki-Gręzki [M. Pokropek, T. Strączek 1993, pp. 106 and 113]

RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The old farmhouse in Filipy was dismantled after we had documented it (Fig. 28). Now only photographs and drawings bear witness to its bygone glory: its construction, furnishing, adornment and other features and details. Nevertheless, some of its features and elements seemed fairly interesting; the most notable was its heating system, namely, the “hanging chimney”, the large, wide kitchen stove and the old brick-masoned heating stove that separated the *walkierz* from the *wielka chata*. Besides, there were also the following noteworthy features of the farmhouse: an asymmetrical enfilade of rooms around the main stove, functional separation of the small kitchen (13.6 sq.m.) that served for all the family as a main living space, spatially and semantically opposite to the festive room or *wielka chata*.

Its most important feature was its layout, strikingly similar to the layouts of nineteenth-century farmhouses described in earlier sources [A. Rumelówna 1903, p. 694; Z. Gloger 1907, p. 154] (Fig. 27). More recent Polish authors called it a *trojak* or “three-room cabin” (or “three-spaces hut”; compare Fig. 26: C). This layout scheme was continued in many newer farmhouses in northeastern Poland until the 1960s.

In conclusion, this article, presenting a century-old log house in Filipy, is intended to supplement sources on the history of local architecture by describing a building that was a continuation of the developmental line of the ‘asymmetrical broad-front house’ called *trojak*.

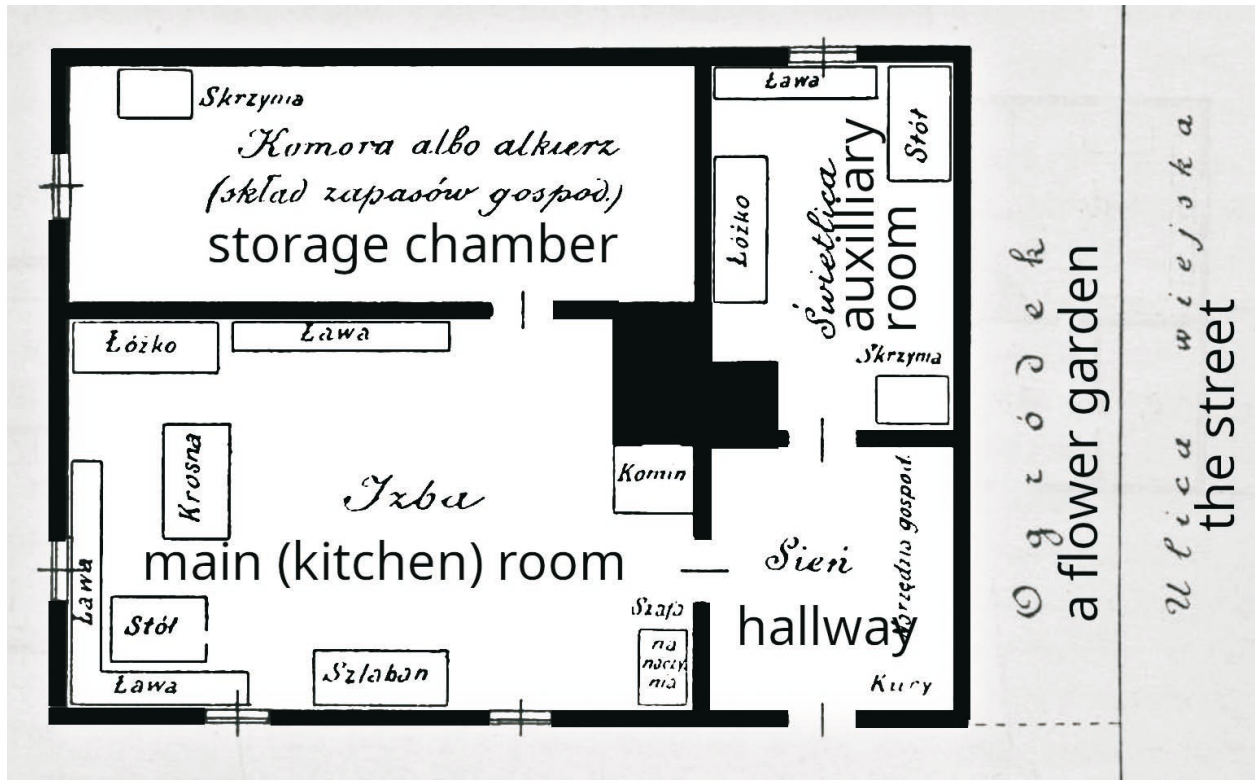


Fig. 27. The layout of a 19th-century house in Masie, 65 km north of Filipy [A. Rumelówna 1903, p. 694; Z. Gloger 1907, p. 154]



Fig. 28. The farmhouse in late 2021; photo by the authors

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