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THE BARN COMPLEX IN MSTÓW: CULTURAL VALUE, REVITALIZATION, AND CHALLENGES IN PRESERVING REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Andrzej Kos*, Nina Sołkiewicz-Kos**

* Silesian University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, ul. Akademicka 7, 44-100 Gliwice, Poland

E-mail: andrzej.j.kos@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000 0001 5833 9531

** Częstochowa University of Technology, Faculty of Civil Engineering, ul Dąbrowskiego 69, 42-201, Częstochowa, Poland

E-mail: ninasolkiewiczkos@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000 0001 5477 3891

DOI: 10.24427/aea-2024-vol16-08

Abstract

The barn complex in Mstów, situated in the northern Kraków-Częstochowa Upland, represents a unique element of regional cultural heritage. Built at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries using local materials such as limestone and wood, the barns reflect the traditional lifestyle of the local community and their adaptation to the natural and socio-economic conditions of the region. Despite their historical and architectural significance, the barns are in a state of advanced degradation due to neglected conservation efforts and the lack of a comprehensive revitalization plan. This article analyzes the cultural, historical, and architectural value of the Mstów barn complex, emphasizing its potential for preservation and sustainable development. By comparing the site with the successfully revitalized barn complex in Żarki, it highlights strategies for adapting traditional architecture to contemporary needs while respecting its cultural and landscape context. Recommendations include preserving the cultural landscape, maintaining traditional aesthetics, and developing new functions that integrate the barns into modern economic and social frameworks. The findings underline the importance of revitalizing the Mstów barn complex as a model for blending heritage conservation with contemporary needs, enriching both the local community and visitors while safeguarding this unique cultural asset for future generations.

Keywords: sustainable development; cultural heritage; traditional building techniques; regional architecture; architectural revitalisation

INTRODUCTION

The complex of barns in Mstów, situated picturesquely on the northern slope of Mount Ściegna in the Kraków-Częstochowa Upland, is not only a relic of the past but also a fascinating example of the interaction between architecture and the natural environment. Built in the early 20th century, these structures showcase traditional construction methods that seamlessly blend with the surrounding terrain. While their original purpose was purely agricultural, they are now gaining recognition as cultural heritage landmarks and as potential reference points for contemporary studies on regional architecture. Unfortunately, their deteriorating condition highlights the urgent need for preservation efforts.

This article aims to explore the architectural and landscape significance of the Mstów barns and

their role in shaping the identity of the place. Through a detailed analysis of their architectural features, their relationship with the natural surroundings, and their importance to the local community, the authors seek to demonstrate how such structures can be viewed as an integral part of the region's cultural heritage.

From a historical and cultural perspective, these barns reflect the agricultural traditions and construction techniques characteristic of rural areas in the early 20th century. Their location on hillside slopes, supported by stone foundations, exemplifies how architecture adapted to the specific natural conditions of the Kraków-Częstochowa Upland. The use of locally sourced materials, such as limestone and wood, influenced not only the overall shapes of the buildings but also the

detailing of walls, gables, and roofs. Research on agricultural complexes in Poland, including barns, remains limited. Most studies focus on wooden sacral or residential architecture, while agricultural buildings rarely receive in-depth attention. This article highlights the significance of such structures within small-town architecture. Restoring the appreciation for traditional forms of agricultural buildings could contribute to revitalizing high-quality architecture in small towns. Promoting distinctive yet regionally inspired architectural forms in contemporary design is rare, especially in residential construction, where such examples are scarce. However, these characteristics are more frequently found in agricultural architecture.

The article provides a simplified architectural and urban analysis of a complex that serves as a representative example of regional building characteristics in this area.

The research methods include historical analysis, photographic documentation, and on-site field studies. This approach not only sheds light on the architectural and landscape value of the complex but also places it within a broader cultural and social context.

1. THE CHARACTER OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN THE NORTHERN PART OF THE KRAKÓW-CZĘSTOCHOWA UPLAND

The Kraków-Częstochowa Upland is a unique geographical region where the natural landscape meets centuries-old settlement traditions. The northern part of the Upland, encompassing areas near Częstochowa, stands out with its distinct spatial character shaped by both natural and cultural influences. Here, among limestone rock formations, open meadows, and small forests, villages and settlements emerged, with buildings harmoniously blending into the surrounding landscape [A. Kos 2019, p.125].

The history of construction in the northern part of the Upland dates back to the Middle Ages, when the first watchtowers and defensive castles were built using local limestone. Over time, this material became one of the most important building resources, used not only in monumental structures but also in simple residential and farm buildings. The characteristic combination of limestone, wood, and later, brick, became a hallmark of local architecture, reflecting both the availability of materials and the climatic and economic conditions of the region [Z. Myczkowski 1977, p. 84].

The traditional settlement patterns of the northern Upland reflect pragmatism and thoughtful spatial organization. Rural farmsteads, often located along main roads, featured elongated plots where residential

and farm buildings were arranged functionally, taking into account daily needs and fire safety. The architecture of these villages, though modest in form, was cohesive and well-integrated with the landscape.

However, contemporary urbanization processes have significantly altered the character of the region. New developments, often carried out without regard for local traditions, introduce spatial chaos and weaken the cultural identity of the villages. Many traditional buildings have been replaced by structures with a universal, anonymous character, leading to the erosion of the unique landscape of the northern Kraków-Częstochowa Upland [A. Kos 2017, p. 68].

1.1. Analysis of 19th-Century Buildings in the Mstów Municipality

The village of Mstów, situated on the Warta River, is the administrative center of the northernmost municipality of the Kraków-Częstochowa Upland (Jura Krakowsko-Częstochowska). This area lies at the crossroads of several historical regions: Lesser Poland (Małopolska), Silesia (Śląsk), and Greater Poland (Wielkopolska). Its location significantly influenced the shaping of local culture and art. In the Middle Ages, an important trade route from Silesia to Greater Poland passed through this region, fostering the development of craftsmanship and commerce.

The earliest mention of Mstów dates back to 1193. The document refers to the property of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine from the Piasek Monastery in Wrocław, which included a newly established branch in Mstów. The monks, who are believed to have arrived here in the 12th century, built a church and a monastery [H. Hohensee-Ciszewska 1965, p. 161]. The monastic complex also served as a fortified structure. The defensive nature of this site is evidenced by the partially reconstructed ring of walls with cylindrical towers surrounding the church and monastery.

The urban layout of Mstów (which received town privileges in 1279) is clearly legible, featuring a square-shaped market square with streets radiating from its corners. The oldest forms of urban and rural secular buildings date back to the second half of the 19th century. These structures were primarily built from wood, which was widely used at the time. Wood was often combined with limestone, which was abundantly available in the region. This construction method is one of the distinctive features of vernacular architecture in this area. A notable example of such development is the preserved complex of barns in Mstów, located south of the village.

Rural residential architecture is represented by both broad-front and narrow-front cottages. These ho-

uses feature log construction walls and either gable or hipped roofs. They are oriented either parallel or perpendicular to the road, with the primary (longer) façade ideally facing south or east. In terms of interior layout, several types of cottages can be distinguished. There are simple two-room and three-room arrangements, as well as more complex multi-room layouts with one or two rows of rooms. Some examples feature a three-room residential section (hallway, main room, storage chamber) integrated under a common roof with a small barn and cowshed, positioned on the opposite side of the hallway.

2. HISTORY AND FUNCTION OF THE BARN COMPLEX

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Mstów was a small settlement where life centered on agriculture and small-scale crafts. Although Mstów held town rights until the 19th century, it lost this status in 1870 due to administrative reforms in the Russian Partition. This shift gave the village a more rural character, although some urban traditions remained.

2.1. Origins of the Barn Complex

The barn complex in Mstów was created to meet the agricultural needs of the local community. Due to the small size of farms, building barns away from residential areas became a necessity. The barns began

to appear at the foot of Mount Ściegna (on its northern slope) at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, about 400 meters from the town square. This location was ideal due to its proximity to farmland and suitable terrain [H. Adamczewska-Wejhert, K. Wejhert 1986, p. 33].

The first barns were built using traditional timber log construction methods typical of the region; Fig.1. Over time, construction techniques evolved: timber-frame structures were introduced, followed by more durable barns made of limestone from nearby quarries. This progression resulted in three types of barns: timber barns with stone foundations, mixed stone-and-timber barns (with stone gable walls), and fully stone-built barns. These changes reflected the need for greater durability and the availability of materials [M. Trawińska 1966, p. 99].

2.2. Original Features

Initially, the complex consisted of over 60 barns (according to the National Heritage Institute), arranged in several parallel rows. Positioned in tight formations, the barns created compact building lines along a path resembling a street, which facilitated spatial organization. Rectangular in shape, the barns were built on stone foundations and had gable roofs covered with thatch, roofing felt, or asbestos-cement sheets. This layout provided easy access to each barn and maximized space usage. Today, only about six barns remain, some in poor condition with missing roofs or sec-



Fig. 1. Archival photograph of the barn complex, dating to the 1960s. The barns are built using log construction and are supported by limestone foundations; source: Archives of the Mstów Commune Office.



Fig. 2. Archival photograph of the barn complex, dating to the 1960s. The closely spaced buildings formed continuous frontages along a road resembling a street. In the background, Szwajcer Hill with the monastic complex of the Canons Regular; source: Archives of the Mstów Commune Office.

tions of walls. Despite their historical importance, these barns are deteriorating, even though they were listed in the Municipal Register of Monuments in 2012.

2.3. Socio-Economic Role

Although socio-economic changes in the second half of the 20th century led to the neglect and decline of this area (due to a lack of protection programs for cultural heritage not classified as monuments at the time), the barns played a vital role in Mstów's economy. Their layout and location supported agricultural activities such as grain threshing and the storage of supplies, tools, and animal feed. The history and function of these barns demonstrate the local community's ability to adapt to challenging natural (topographical) and economic conditions.

2.4. Construction

The barn complex in Mstów is notable for its use of local building materials, reflecting the region's architectural traditions. Limestone, sourced from nearby quarries, was primarily used for foundations and load-bearing walls, while timber, which was easily accessi-

ble and inexpensive, was used for log or timber-frame walls and roof structures. Initially, roofs were thatched, but later replaced with ceramic tiles for greater durability and weather resistance [Gminny Program Opieki nad Zabytkami Gminy (Municipal Program for the Protection of Municipal Monuments) Mstów 2013, p. 41].

The architectural details of the barns are modest, reflecting their functional, agricultural purpose. Key features include massive stone foundations, simple wooden door frames, and the absence of decorative elements. The barns were designed as storage spaces for crops, tools, and animal feed. In fully stone-built barns, durability and resistance to weathering were prioritized. Vertical slits in the side walls served as ventilation systems, preventing dampness in stored crops. Fig. 3, Fig. 4 [H. Wiącek-Marzec 2015, p. 2].

Barn No. 1 was laid out on a rectangular plan and set on a stone foundation. The gable walls were constructed using the "wild" stone masonry technique with field limestone, while the longitudinal walls were built in a timber frame structure, externally clad with boards. A stone barn, designated as No. 2, was later added on the northern side. Based on its functional

layout, the building represents the type of drive-through barn, featuring a concrete threshing floor forming the central passage and a separate partitioned space (the so-called *sąsiek*) used for storing hay, grain, or straw. The barn was covered with a gable roof with rafter-collar beam construction, finished with asbestos-cement sheets. Currently, the structure is in a state of ruin.

Barn No. 2 was laid out on an elongated rectangular plan and entirely built of field limestone. Like the first structure, it represents the drive-through barn type, with a concrete threshing floor and a separate *sąsiek* for storing hay or agricultural produce. The barn was covered with a gable roof of rafter-collar beam construction, finished with asbestos-cement sheets. At present, it is, like Barn No. 1, in a state of ruin [H. Wiącek-Marzec 2015, pp. 7–21].

Barn No. 3 (Fig. 4, on the right) was laid out on a rectangular plan, set on a stone foundation made of limestone. The structure was built in a timber post-and-beam construction (posts, beams, and braces) and externally clad with boards. The functional layout is non-drive-through – the central part features a threshing floor in the form of a wooden plank floor, with

three rooms, also with wooden floors, located on either side. The barn was covered with a symmetrical gable roof of rafter-purlin construction, finished with roofing felt. Currently, the building, like the two previous structures, is in a state of ruin.

Barn No. 4 (Fig. 4, on the left) was laid out on a rectangular plan, set on a stone foundation of field limestone. The building was constructed using a timber post-and-beam technique (posts, beams, and braces) and externally clad with boards. The functional layout was drive-through – with a central threshing floor and two rooms for storing crops on either side. The barn was covered with a symmetrical gable roof of rafter-purlin construction, finished with roofing felt. At present, the building is in a state of ruin; only the stone foundations have survived [H. Wiącek-Marzec 2015, pp. 7–21].

The remaining structures – Barns No. 5 and 6 – which until ten years ago were significant elements of the hill's landscape, have been destroyed. Their remnants are now overgrown with vegetation, rendering them indistinct in the terrain.

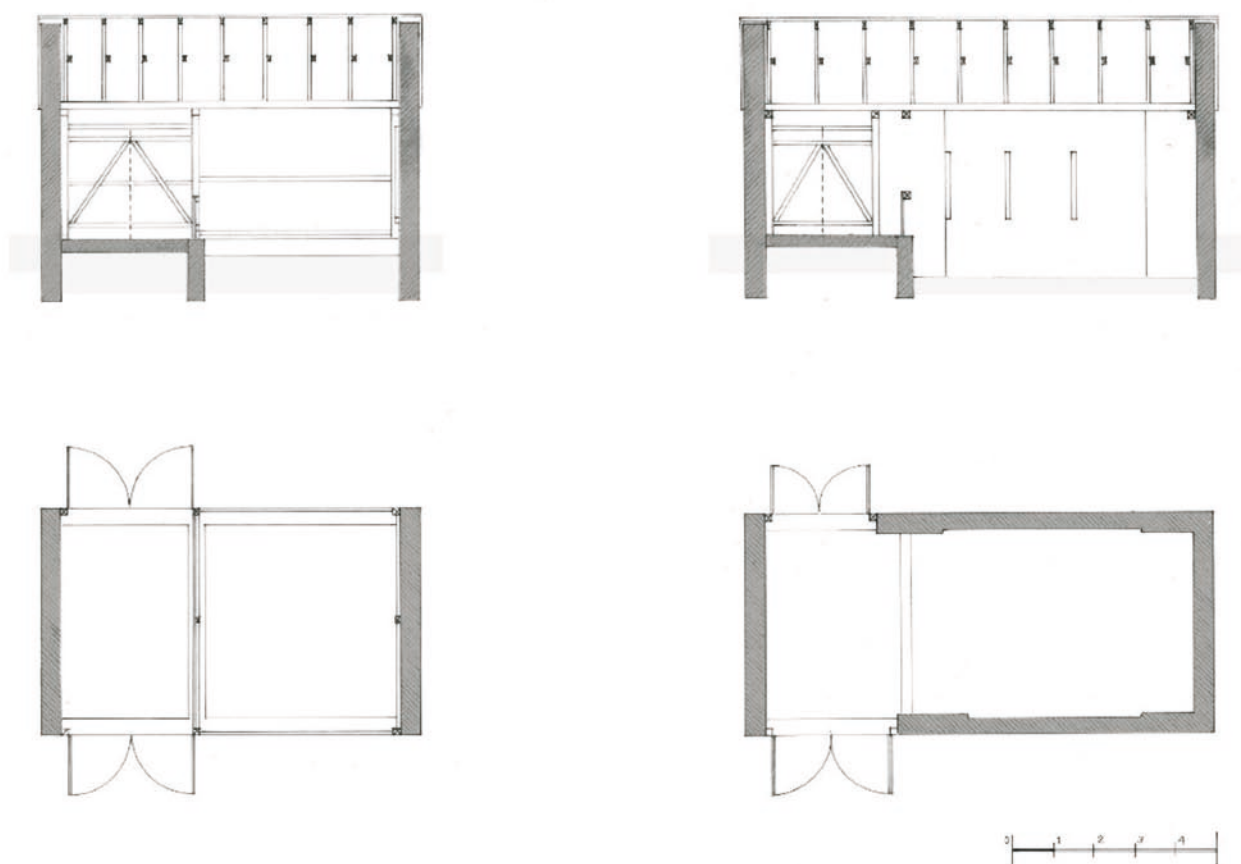


Fig. 3. Cross-section and floor plan of two barns with masonry gable walls and wooden structure for the remaining elements. The drawings are based on documentation from the white card of the heritage objects; source: illustration by Andrzej Kos, based on original drawings by Hanna Wiącek-Marzec.

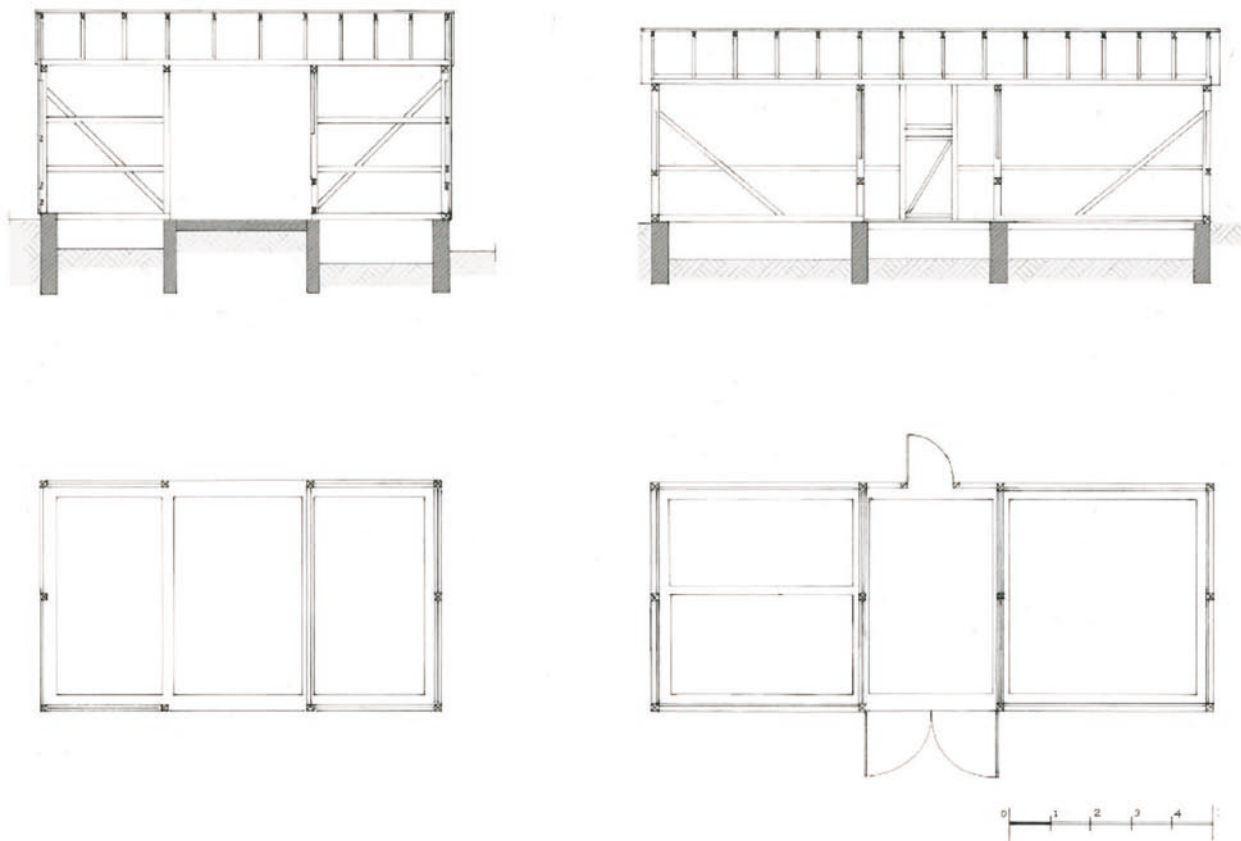


Fig. 4. Cross-section and floor plan of two barns with wooden construction placed on stone foundations. The drawings were created based on documentation included in the white card of the heritage objects; source: illustration by Andrzej Kos, based on original drawings by Hanna Wiącek-Marzec.

2.5. Spatial Layout

The layout of the Mstów barn complex resembles an agricultural street, typical of rural farm complexes in Poland. This simple spatial organization aligned barns in a single row along a road, ensuring easy access to each structure. The arrangement facilitated efficient transportation and work organization during harvests. The proximity of the barns to farmland and their location on a slight elevation also made use of natural terrain features, such as protection against flooding. This spatial layout encouraged social integration, as shared work became a daily part of life for the local community, Fig. 5 [W. Rączka 1985, p. 22].

3. THE CURRENT STATE OF THE BARN COMPLEX

The barn complex in Mstów is in a state of significant disrepair, with only six of the original 60 buildings remaining. Many of the remaining structures lack roofs, and some have lost large sections of walls, severely diminishing their functional and aesthetic value. The

buildings that remain are in poor condition, with some at risk of collapse; Fig. 6.

The inclusion of the complex in the Municipal Register of Historic Monuments in 2012 aimed to place it under conservation protection; however, the lack of further actions and regular maintenance work has contributed to the acceleration of degradation processes. The greatest threats to the structural stability of the buildings are the damage to (or absence of) roofs and the deterioration of foundations, which, under the influence of weather conditions such as precipitation, frost, and temperature fluctuations, have been steadily worsening. The erosion of limestone and the degradation of timber elements, exacerbated by the lack of protection against external factors, have led to irreversible losses in the historic fabric. Conservation challenges also stem from limited financial resources and insufficient engagement from local authorities and the community. The lack of awareness of the historical value of the complex further complicates the possibility of undertaking effective preservation efforts; Fig. 7, Fig. 8, Fig. 9, Fig. 10.

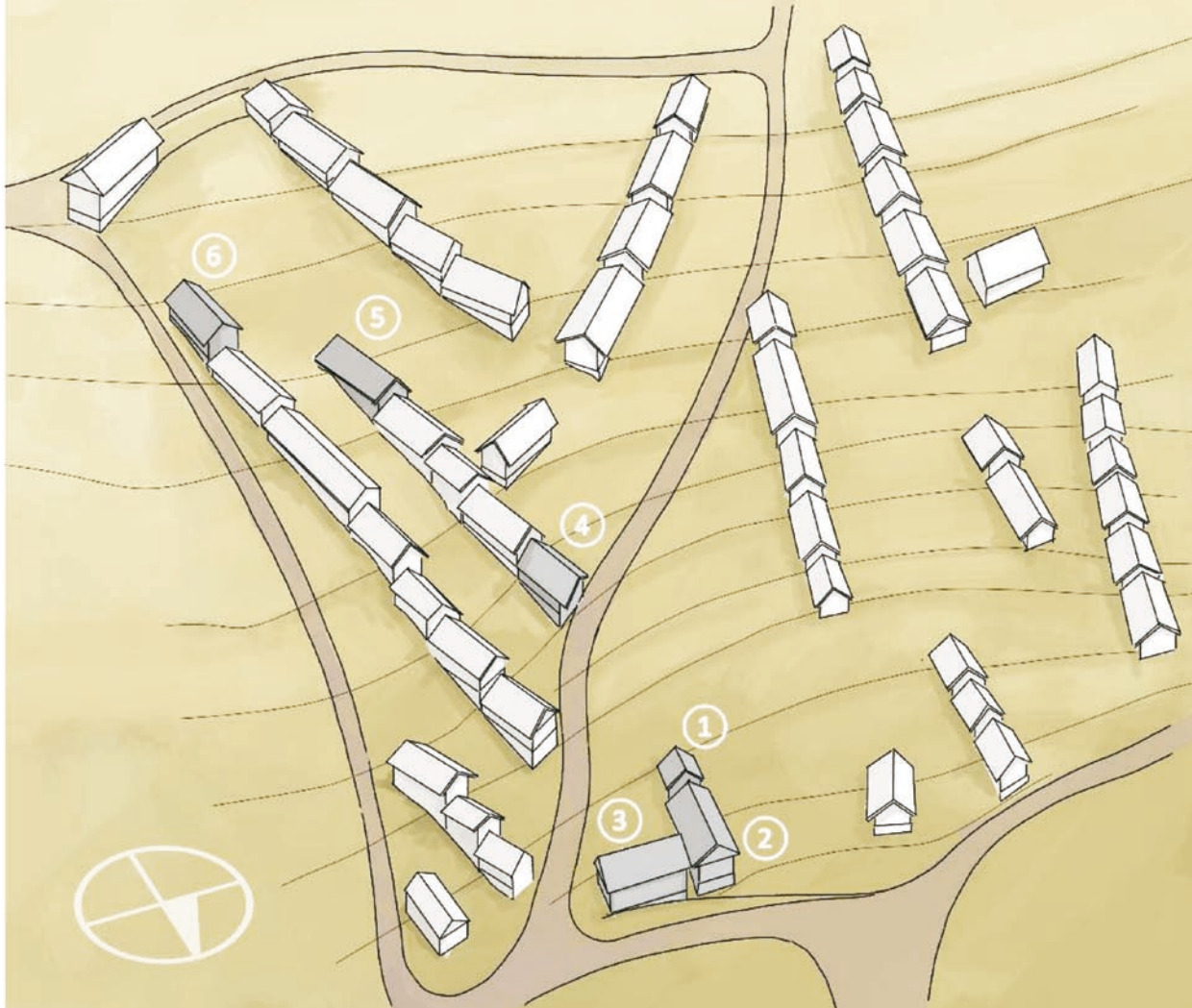


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the original urban layout of the northern slope of Góra Ściegna showing the full layout of barns. The illustration captures the original character of the building complex. Barns No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 until recently formed a well-preserved cultural element of the hill's landscape; source: illustration by Andrzej Kos.

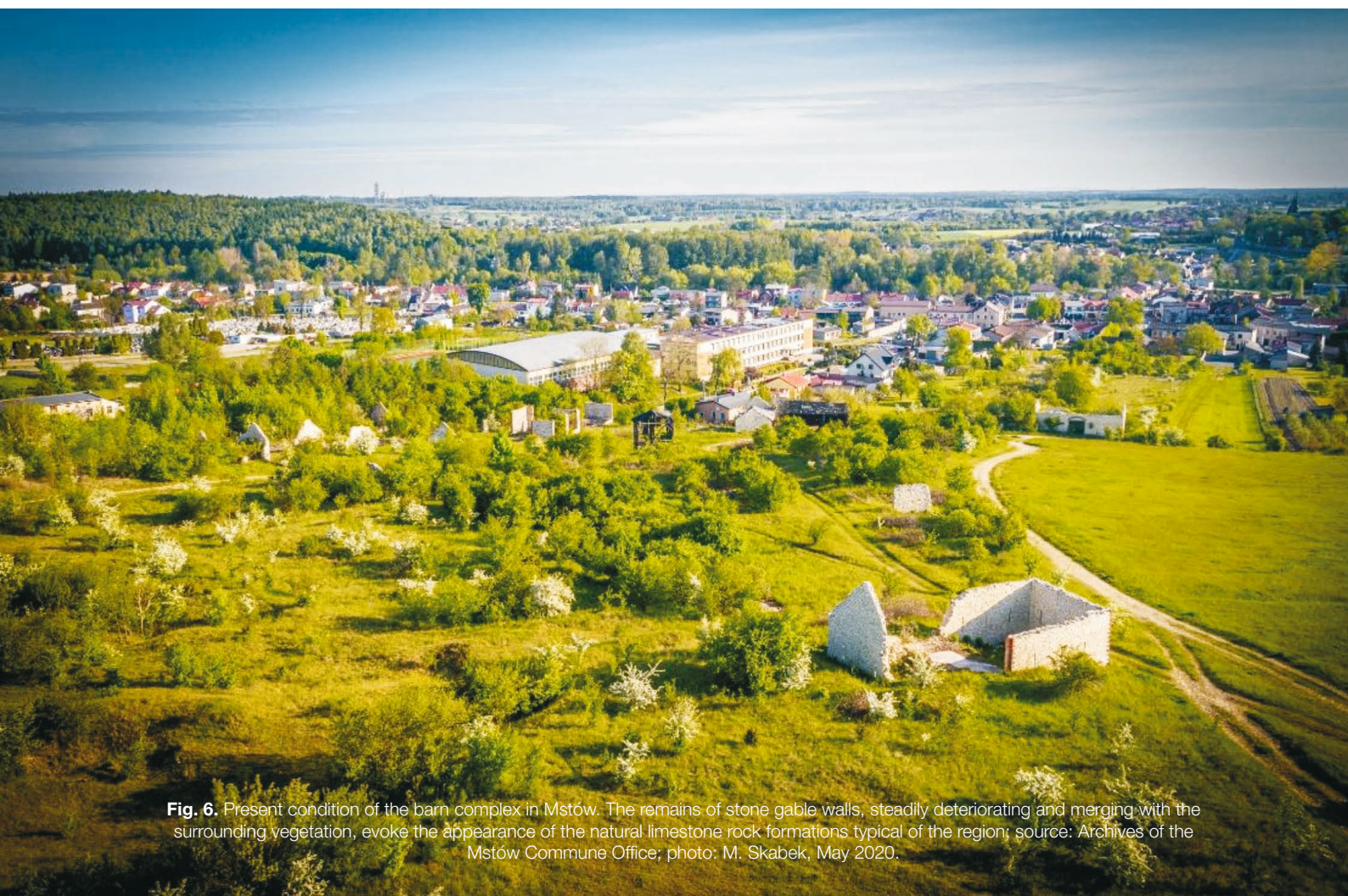


Fig. 6. Present condition of the barn complex in Mstów. The remains of stone gable walls, steadily deteriorating and merging with the surrounding vegetation, evoke the appearance of the natural limestone rock formations typical of the region; source: Archives of the Mstów Commune Office; photo: M. Skabek, May 2020.



Fig. 7. Current condition of the barn complex in Mstów. The photograph shows the stone gable walls of Barn No. 1 and Barn No. 2 (with a shared central wall). On the right side, Barn No. 3 with its timber structure visible. The buildings are in a state of ruin; source: photo: Andrzej Kos, February 2025.



Fig. 8. Barn No. 3. A timber-constructed building currently in a state of ruin; source: photo by Andrzej Kos, February 2025.



Fig. 9. Barn No. 4. The timber-constructed building has been completely destroyed. Remnants of the structure 2 a fragment of the stone foundation made of field limestone – have survived; source: photo by Andrzej Kos, February 2025.



Fig. 10. Barn No. 5 in Mstów. The building is in a state of ruin. A portion of the perimeter walls has been preserved; source: photo by Andrzej Kos, February 2025.

4. COMPARISON OF THE BARN COMPLEXES IN ŻARKI AND MŚTÓW

Examples of successful revitalizations, such as the adaptation of the barn complex in Żarki, demonstrate the potential of similar initiatives. However, achieving comparable results in Mstów would require the development of a comprehensive action program based on collaboration between specialists, local government, and the community, as well as conscious management of cultural heritage.

Both Żarki and Mstów barn complexes represent regional agricultural architecture of the northern Kraków-Częstochowa Upland, built at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, their preservation and contemporary use differ significantly.

The Żarki barns, located conveniently near the town, were rebuilt after a fire in 1938 using local limestone and brick, with ceramic tile roofs ensuring durability. Successful revitalization efforts by the municipality adapted the barns for modern uses, such as regional trade, cultural events, and tourism. This initiative has enhanced their value to both the local community and visitors, serving as a model for adapting heritage sites to modern needs; Fig. 11.

In contrast, the barns in Mstów, situated on a scenic hillside, remain largely untouched, retaining their original materials and structure. Built with stone foundations and wooden elements, they reflect traditional regional techniques but are more susceptible to decay. The lack of conservation and community engagement has led to significant deterioration, with only a few barns still standing, many in a state of near-collapse. While their unique landscape setting adds value, their current condition prevents any functional use without extensive reconstruction.

Żarki showcases how regional architecture can be successfully adapted to contemporary needs through careful revitalization. Meanwhile, Mstów's barns, though more authentic and set in a striking landscape, urgently require preservation to realize their cultural and economic potential. Both complexes are valuable examples of regional heritage, but their future depends on effective conservation and revitalization efforts.

5. THE BARN COMPLEX AS AN ELEMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

5.1. Cultural and Historical Value

The barn complex in Mstów is a unique relic of the Kraków-Częstochowa Upland's agricultural traditions, reflecting the lifestyle of the local community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Built with local

materials such as limestone and wood, the barns showcase a sustainable use of natural resources and adaptation to the terrain. The white limestone walls echo the region's rock formations, while the red ceramic tiles mirror the hues of autumnal beech forests.

Although this architecture partly arose from the region's economic hardships, its simplicity and harmony with the natural landscape constitute a value worth preserving. The inclusion of the barns in the Municipal Register of Monuments highlights their importance as cultural heritage, offering inspiration for modern architects on how traditional techniques can be adapted to contemporary needs. These structures also document the region's history, illustrating the connection between culture, economy, and landscape [J. Królikowski 1991, p. 31].

5.2. Tourism Potential

The barns' picturesque setting at the foot of Mount Ściegna and their historical character give them significant tourism potential. With proper revitalization, they could serve as educational spaces, such as an agricultural museum, craft workshops, or exhibition halls for traditional architecture.

Organizing cultural events, such as local festivals, markets, or art sessions, could revive the site and create a dynamic space for the community and visitors. The barn complex could also act as a starting point for exploring the Kraków-Częstochowa Upland, enriching the region's tourism offerings [B. Czarnecki 2015, p. 217].

5.3. Local and Global Significance

On a local scale, the barns constitute an important element of Mstów's identity, reminding residents of their heritage and traditions. These agricultural buildings showcase pragmatic architecture, characterized by the coherence of function, construction, and form. The barn complex in Mstów is a consistent realization of this principle. The spatial arrangement of the buildings naturally and harmoniously integrates with the slope of Ściegna Hill, emphasizing the context of the site and the strong relationship between architecture and its surroundings.

On a global scale, the barn complex, both through its size and its integration into the landscape, represents the European history of agriculture and architecture. This site serves as a model for the preservation and adaptation of traditional buildings to contemporary needs while respecting their historical character.



Fig. 11. An example of a revitalized barn complex in Żarki. The restored structures have gained new functional purposes, highlighting the contrast between the preserved complex in Żarki and the neglected condition of the barns in Mstów;
source: photo by Nina Solkiewicz-Kos.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The barn complex in Mstów is a valuable element of the cultural heritage of the northern part of the Kraków-Częstochowa Upland. Its significance arises from the use of local materials – limestone and wood – as well as its harmonious integration into the natural and cultural landscape. The barns reflect the traditional lifestyle of the local community at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, illustrating their adaptation to the region's socio-economic and natural conditions.

The analyzed barn complex, situated on the slope of Ściegna Hill, occupies a key position along the city's compositional axis – directly opposite the Schweizer Hill with the monastery complex of the Canons Regular, whose history dates back to the 12th century. These two elevations, together with their cultural structures, frame Mstów's historic town center and constitute fundamental compositional elements of the city, crucial for its identification and identity.

Particular attention should be given to the neglected area of the barn complex. Its historical, cultural, and social value necessitates the development of appropriate solutions through the organization of architectural and urban-architectural competitions. Only through such initiatives is it possible to rediscover unique sites and creatively highlight their civilizational and cultural significance.

In relation to the inventory of the buildings conducted a decade ago, it must be noted that the then-conservation recommendations are no longer applicable. At that time, the condition of the structures was assessed as relatively good, with only minor damage to the stone foundations, wall cladding, and roof coverings reported. The current situation requires a different conservation approach, focused on the reconstruction of the structures based on preserved archival documentation. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that both the reconstruction of the buildings or their elements and the development of their surroundings will always require updating and adaptation to the conceptual and functional needs of contemporary users.

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