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MUNICIPAL PARKS IN BIELSKO-BIALA – CONCEPTS AND REALISATIONS FROM 1899 VS. TODAY

PARKI MIEJSKIE BIELSKA-BIAŁEJ – WIZJE I REALIZACJE Z 1899 R. A STAN OBECNY

Abstract

A regulation plan for the city of Bielsko procured in 1899 described ways of arranging the city landscape in the circumstances of a dynamic industrial growth. The following dissertation is focused on the matters concerning municipal parks. Documents from the 19th century are compared with modern planning documents as well as today's needs and expectations of residents of the city. It also presents the current condition of park greenery.

Keywords: municipal park, cultivated greenery, Bielsko-Biala, town renovation

Streszczenie

Sporządzony w 1899 roku plan regulacji miasta Bielska określał sposoby uporządkowania krajobrazu miejskiego w warunkach dynamicznego rozwoju przemysłu. Niniejsze rozważania skupiają się wokół kwestii dotyczących parków miejskich. Stanowią porównanie zapisów z XIX wieku z obecnymi dokumentami planistycznymi, a także współczesnymi potrzebami i oczekiwaniami mieszkańców miasta. Wskazują również aktualną kondycję zieleni parkowej.

Słowa kluczowe: park miejski, zielenć urządzona, Bielsko-Biala, odnowa miast

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1. Introduction

Municipal parks in landscape composition of the city of Bielsko-Biała gained special worth at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century¹. Similarly to many other cities of Europe and Poland, Bielsko and Biała were experiencing an era of intense industrialisation, whose aftermath was chaotic development of city planning [6, p. 20–21]. One of the most important requirements in the hygiene of towns was “establishing a healthier relation between people and nature, which was reflected in including green areas and gardens when building towns” [6, p. 54]. An expression of these layouts was the widely propagated idea of a *garden city*, an inspiration to European plans of putting urban structures in order².

Max Fabiani, the author of *The comprehensive urban regulation plan of Bielsko* (1899), indicated in the introduction to his work that “a modern urban regulation of cities is characterised by simultaneous grasping and including all possible utilitarian and esthetic aspects”. Among them he enumerates e.g.: sanitary reasons, traffic aspects, taking into account market places, squares, waterworks, stately buildings of the city, the comfort of habitat, diversity of buildings as well as municipal gardens and playgrounds [5, p. 8].

Solutions proposed in the document mentioned above are visible in today’s layout of the city, although the plan was not fulfilled in its entirety³. Providing the context for the plan of the urban regulation of Bielsko from 1899 and its regulations concerning green areas, particularly municipal parks, and presenting modern means and directions of city development in comparison with the users’ needs of cultivated greenery will allow for a full understanding of the significance of municipal parks in landscape composition of the city of Bielsko-Biała.

2. Origin and selected layouts of the plan of urban regulation of Bielsko from 1899

The great industrialisation of European cities in 18th and 19th centuries allowed for fulfilling the growing market needs, but at the same time worsened living conditions of the locals, due to pollution and setting up buildings very tightly. Problems emerging within urban structures were researched and described by specialists from various fields (journalists, writers, hygienists, doctors, architects and builders), as well as social activists. Due to relatively late development of industry in Poland, postulates against awful council and housing conditions in expanding cities emerged at the end of the 19th century.

¹ The city of Bielsko-Biała is located in the southern part of the Silesian voivodeship, in the Silesian Foothills, at the foot of Beskid Śląski and Little Beskids. It emerged on 1 January 1951 as a result of merging two entities until then separate: Bielsko and Biała. The process of uniting these two in terms of economy and society was already visible in the 19th century [9, p. 7–12].

² Ebenezer Howard’s (1850–1928) concept of *garden city* was an answer to social and economic problems of England of that era [8, p. 225].

³ The plan from 1899 was not entirely fulfilled due to economic reasons as well as the protests of some locals, who feared demolitions. A part of the plan was realised after the end of WWI [4, p. 82–83].

Poland then joined the trend of renovation of towns spreading in Europe and lying at the base of the forming modern urban thought⁴.

The necessity to create a plan mainly emerged from: “rapid expansion of the lower suburbs and expansion of the city among difficult landform features”. Additionally the city administration saw the need for a “cohesive vision focused on the future of holistic regulation”. Eventually the document was made in 1899 and its author was a Viennese architect and urbanist, Max Fabiani⁵. In terms of planning, the town of Bielsko outran other Polish cities, e.g. Cracow or Warsaw⁶.

The main purpose of Fabiani’s document was to solve transport problems between individual quarters and the city centre, and between Bielsko and Biała. The author clearly underlined the importance of proper connection between Bielsko and Biała, although the cities did not constitute a unity at that time [5, p. 11].

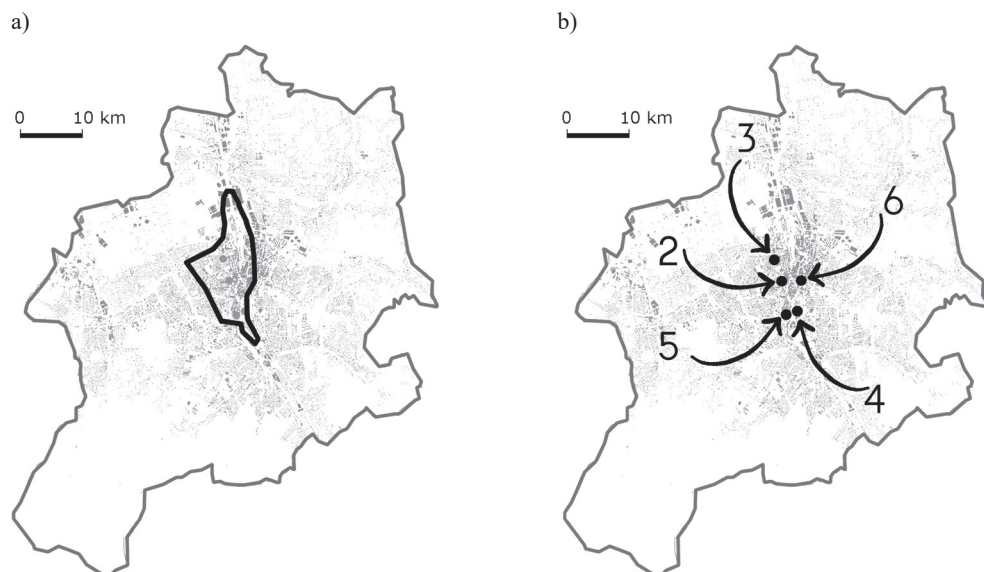
The plan also intended getting into order the existing buildings (division into functional zones) and creating a project for urban development of Bielsko in the 20th century, at the same time taking into account protection of historic substance [4, p. 79–80]. Fabiani stressed the importance of parks and city greenery. In a commentary to the regulation plan he proposed an increase in the number of public gardens, particularly important in an industrial city. He also postulated that in an industrial quarter there should be “singled out as many spots for resting and leisure activities as possible for people working there” [5, p. 27]. Some of the premises included in the said document touched upon matters of cultivated greenery in particular locations (Ill. 1). Among them there were:

1. Division of streets into existing ones – situated radially to the centre, and ring roads spreading from that point in concentric circles. Within the ring roads – a proposed compact buildings, outside houses surrounded by gardens, parks and loose buildings;
2. Organising gardens in lieu of cemeteries destined for demolition, accentuating regular division of park areas;
3. Suggestion to enlarge the municipal park near the shooting range (by playgrounds), as far as to the outer ring road – Piastowska street;
4. Preserving the treed promenade by the river Biała;
5. Creating park areas near today’s Partyzantów, Młyńska and Batorego streets;
6. Closing the untended low-situated castle garden as well as reorganising the area – creating a residential quarter with central avenue [4, p. 80].

⁴ “(...) the development of modern urban thought stemmed directly from the protest we observe in the 19th century against lack of plans and economic conflicts of a capitalist city” [11, p. 9].

⁵ Due to the political situation of that time, the urban development of the Bielsko-Biała area grew from Viennese influences. Bielsko was under the Habsburg rule as early as 1526 [2, p. 267]. Biała was joined to Austria in 1772 [9, p. 28]. In this circle Camillo Sitte’s conceptions – which treated the city as a work of art – were highly regarded (Sitte was an Italian high-rank official of national authorities, an eminent theoretician of the Viennese school of urban development) [11, p. 11]. Works on the study took over a year and a half. They were however preceded by geodetic measurements of Bielsko and Biała in 1893-4 and inviting foreign experts – e.g. Camillo Sitte and Rttter von Gruber – an Austrian royal counsellor, who in 1898 procured a sketch of the regulation [5, p. 9–10].

⁶ In Cracow a contest for a regulation plan for the city was announced in 1909–1910. In case of Warsaw, the city regulation plan was made in 1916 [4, p. 83].



III. 1. Map of Bielsko-Biala – current city borders: a) with marked area included in the urban regulation plan of Bielsko (1899), b) with marked cultivated green areas, included in the aforementioned premises (adapt. By M. Sawicka, 2015)

3. Current condition

In current planning documents of Bielsko-Biala there are also passages indicating a widespread recognition of the value of municipal parks due to their aesthetic, hygienic and practical functions. City parks, constituting an important part of cultivated greenery of the city, influence the formation of spatial and health-related conditions in a city by modifying the local climate. They are a place for the locals to rest and exercise⁷.

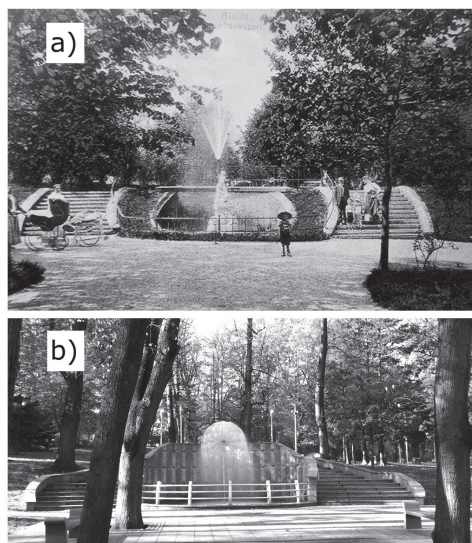
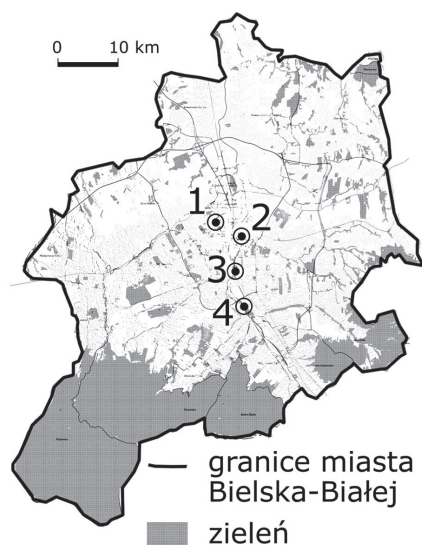
In the landscape composition of the city, the park areas are arranged in a mosaic-like way (III. 2). Mostly historic parks are included in this category: the Słowackiego Park, created in 1896, the “Ratuszowy” Park (The City Hall Park) (1898), The Włókniarzy Park (Park of Textile Workers) (first half of 19th century) and the Strzygowskiego Park (ca. 1900).

Although the city of Bielsko-Biala is surrounded by attractive areas of high natural values, the centre lacks an organised, uninterrupted system of cultivated greenery that would be based on historic layouts and would make use of the site of the river Biala⁸.

Among tendencies shaping the composition of the city, tightening of buildings needs to be named. Moreover in the last several years there have been other activities having

⁷ Examples of cultivated greenery are also greens, cemeteries, family allotments and house gardens, the greenery of sport facilities, housing estates and street greenery [12, p. 29].

⁸ Bielsko-Biala directly neighbours mountain ranges reaching along almost the entire southern border of Poland and partly situated within the city area, together with forest areas of reach biodiversity. Such conditions are favourable to the development of tourism and leisure [12, p. 27].



III. 2. Current borders of the city of Bielsko-Biała with green areas marked (in grey), including historic municipal parks: 1. Słowackiego Park, 2. „Ratuszowy” Park, 3. Włókniarzy Park, 4. Strzygowskiego Park (Information accessed from the City Hall in Bielsko-Biała, 2012) (adapt. M. Sawicka, 2015). Photographs: Słowackiego Park, view on steps and fountain: 1a) from 1911 [3, p. 117]; 1b) current condition, post-revitalisation (fot. By M. Sawicka, 2015)

a negative impact on the condition of municipal parks, e.g. cutting down the trees shading the Włókniarzy Park. These situations are a proof of a discord between the rules from *Studium uwarunkowań i kierunków zagospodarowania przestrzennego Bielska-Białej* (*A study of the conditions and directions of spatial land management of Bielsko-Biała*) and the existing investment-building practice.

The most important goal presented in *Studium* is “preserving and cultivating natural and cultural values, including protection and efficient development, as well as using historic facilities (with special attention to places entered in the Register of Historic Monuments), historic places, as an ingredient of nature and landscape serving the development of tourist and leisurely functions” [12, p. 120]. The document also intends protection of all existing forms of park greenery, greens and squares against a change of the ways of its usage, and the necessity to create new places “that will enrich the city’s system of green areas”, especially in its centre [12, p. 123].

The presented rules are, however, quite general. The lack of a detailed plan of protection over Bielsko-Biała’s municipal parks and future plans foreseeing their development, can lead valuable parks to negligence.

Not all cultivated green areas of the city are covered by the local plans of spatial development or preservation maintenance. Currently there are works being done over a plan for the area, whose part is the Słowackiego Park. In 2014 a local plan for spatial development was enacted – it introduced a ban on building and was concerned with protection of green areas in Bielsko-Biała. These are specific examples that are proof of a growing awareness about the importance of these areas in city structure.

Alas, there is nothing being done in terms of tending to the greenery and adjusting parks to users' needs. For many years there has been no update of data concerning the condition of greenery. The last stocktaking of plants in the city area took place in 1996. Updating the knowledge in this field would allow for taking proper actions aiming at preventing the greenery from degradation [1, p. 242]. *Expanding and making available the knowledge of natural resources of the city* is on the list of ecological priorities, included in the *Aktualizacja programu ochrony środowiska w mieście Bielsku-Białej do roku 2016 z perspektywą na lata 2017–2020 (Update of environmental protection plan in Bielsko-Biala up to 2016 with a prospect for 2017–2020)* [1, p. 263].

4. Importance of municipal parks in the contexts of users

From the time when Max Fabiani created his regulation plan of Bielsko, there have appeared many new ways of using municipal parks, although the essence of this form of greenery's destination has remained unchanged from the 18th century⁹. Also nowadays these places significantly influence the locals' quality of life.

For the numerous users parks are a zone for taking a break from the city hubbub. Within its administrative borders, the city may have numerous mountainous and forest terrains, but they are located on its southern side, hence they cannot replace green areas in the city centre.

Another group of users are tourists, including business tourists. Municipal parks (together with underslope and forest areas of Little Beskids) should constitute an appealing alternative for the region of Dębowiec, Szynkielnia and Klimczok [12, p. 64–66].

Those who spend their spare time in an active way visit parks more and more often. Parks become a place where people exercise. Hence it is important that the areas they occupy allow people to take exercise in plain air. A good example of that is a growing number of young parents, practicing fitness while taking a walk with their prams and buggies (Ill. 3).

Another answer to current needs of park users are also very popular concerts organised in the Słowackiego Park.

Alas, many parks of Bielsko-Biala require renovation and replacement of basic equipment (e.g. the park on the Bystrzańska street)¹⁰. Such actions would increase the number of people making use of this form of cultivated greenery.

⁹ Public gardens established in city areas were designed for common recreational, play and health-related usage [10, p. 266].

¹⁰ The mentioned issues of bad technical condition of parts of parks or landscape architecture are caused by negligence on the part of administration of municipal parks. Another problem is devastation, which is not a result of failure to notice the values presented by a park but constitutes a manifestation of social problems.



III. 3. “Buggy Race” – plain air event for families with little children, organised by the association BuggyGym in July 2015 in the Słowackiego Park (<http://www.wyscigiwozkow.pl/#!> (access: 01.12.2015))

5. Conclusions

Municipal parks of Bielsko-Biała are characterised by historic, natural, aesthetic and cultural values, which merge with functional features. The significance of this group of places in the city landscape are depicted by R. Feliński’s words: „even in cities one does not lose the longing for greenery and nature, created through long centuries of coexisting with nature” [6, p. 55].

Professor A. Mitkowska asserts that the city of Bielsko-Biała “in the sphere of city landscape is continuously being deprived of all manifestations of the charm of historic daily life” [7, p. 14].

In *Studium* the significance of park greenery, greens and squares is stressed and prevention against a change of the way of using these areas is presumed. Such a threat concerns especially the city centre, which lacks green areas constituting a place for everyday leisure activities for the locals [12, p. 123]. Max Fabiani saw the need to increase the number of parks in an industrial city. Current tendencies of tightening buildings seem to create a situation requiring „healing” in a way similar to those implemented in the plan from 1899.

The planning concepts from the end of the 19th century intended treating aesthetic aspects on a par with the practical ones [5, p. 12]. Such thinking was not without realistic vision, but it intended functionality of the city and its artistic aspect as intertwined matters¹¹.

In the current landscape of Bielsko-Biała municipal parks also constitute an important element of rational urban planning enabling its development and raising the quality of urban composition.

¹¹ Camillo Sitte was guided by these premises [4, p. 78].

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