

# Tacit knowledge of places: experiences from the post-agrarian countryside in Poland

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**Abstract.** This article is framed by a broader discussion on the new meanings conferred by rural areas, and the construction of rurality recently undertaken by human geographers. The aim of the research presented here has been to identify perceptions of the countryside in Poland, at a time when a fundamental transition from agrarian to post-agrarian communities has already taken place. After a brief review of the literature and a presentation of the contemporary conditions of rural development in Poland, the paper presents the results of the study conducted in 22 pre-selected villages in Poland. The social research involved semi-structured interviews and freehand sketches exemplifying tacit knowledge about these places, i.e. the symbolic meaning attributed by people to their living spaces. Results of this research show that uncovering this knowledge generates a variety of information useful in interpreting contemporary rurality as shaped by dynamic change in Poland's economy and social life.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural culture is often defined as a set of factors and mechanisms resulting from socialisation, communication and ways of evaluating the countryside and rural living (Holloway & Kneafsey, 2004). The growing importance of cultural conditions in research on rural communities is evidenced by references to various sources of knowledge, especially when addressing the dynamics of agricultural development and its adaptation to global markets (see Floriańczyk et al., 2012). Depending on the point of view and, above all, the cultural context, knowledge can be treated as a factor in social and economic development considered as either exogenous (Eicher & Staatz, 1998) or endogenous (Hayami & Ruttan, 1985). Research into the specifics of knowledge proves that it is a social resource in need of consolidation, transmission and verification by way of individual and collective evaluation (Drucker, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Through attention being drawn to the creative role of the human being in the landscape, and through a highlighting of reality as a social construct, a knowledge model was developed in which its dual character was emphasised (Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The two main types of knowledge distinguished by authors are explicit and tacit, though the latter is also termed “personal” (Lundvall, 1996). Many have noted a complementarity of the two types of knowledge and their different roles in the processes of learning about the environment and describing places as examples of social phenomena (Drucker, 1994; Guile, 2001; Howells, 2002; Gertler, 2003).

Identifying sources of rural residents’ tacit knowledge by referring to their experiences shows how tightly these issues are intertwined with the non-productive aspects by which local communities function. A village is a space tamed by humans through the local community’s everyday contact with the landscape (Ching & Creed, 1996; Wheler, 2014; Ferrari et al., 2019); it frames the inhabitants’ perceptions of their living space as reflections of values they assign to it (Banini & Ilovan, 2021). This perspective has already been well represented in the writings of H. Lefebvre (1991) focusing on social production of the spaces within which social life takes place. His three-fold understanding of spatiality has been widely outlined and further developed in geography with reference to cities and countryside alike, broadening and enriching our understanding of these spaces (e.g., Gregory, 1994; Schields, 1999; Soja, 1999; Halfacree, 2004; 2006).

The main aim of the research presented in this paper was to define the image of Polish villages in the period following the most fundamental transition from agrarian to post-agrarian communities (Halfacree, 2007). Empirical material showing the ways in which inhabitants perceive the space of their own village and the meaning they assign to various landscape elements was collected from 22 villages in Poland that were the subject of a deliberate selection process (Fig. 1). The results allow for interpretation of the contemporary social perception of the village (the mental construct) as a kind of tacit knowledge. Determining the scale of the spatial knowledge of this kind is important, as both nature and scope were affected significantly by the social and economic changes taking place 30 years after the fall of communism and 15 years on from Poland’s accession to the European Union (Halamska, 2020).

## 2. Materials and methods

Materials for this study were collected during several stages of fieldwork carried out in 2018–2019. Firstly, 22 out of about 200 villages in Poland were selected for their significantly valuable landscape features. This is to say that they represented different origins and types of spatial pattern, as well as a location in the settlement continuum between the centre and the peripheries. The basis for this selection was provided by the Historical Atlas of Villages in Poland, which presents model rural settlements developed between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Szulc, 2002; Szymańska, 2009, 2013).

In each of the selected villages, about a dozen residents participated in social research. The target groups were quota-specific in an attempt to maintain the proportions of the basic demographic and social characteristics of the general populations in the villages under study. The use of semi-structured interviews to conduct this research was determined by the many advantages it brings, the most important of which is the standardization of the responses it gathers. The same information is obtained from all participants in the study, which gives the possibility to generalise conclusions (Babbie, 2007: 276).

The interview questionnaire consisted of 21 basic questions concerning people’s perceptions and evaluations of the village area (associations, ratings, most important features, sense of uniqueness, knowledge of history, important places). In the second part of the research, we followed guidelines



**Fig. 1.** Spatial distribution of the 22 villages under study

Source: own work

set out in the work of K. Lynch (1960) and in later studies (Ladd, 1970; Gieseking, 2013; Wartmann & Purves, 2017). The outcome of this was that 182 sketches were obtained (in the face of 17 interviewees declining to take part in this activity). The process of drawing sketches was observed by researchers, who noted the interviewees' reactions and responses. The freehand sketches were analysed in regard to: 1) the drawing process and composition of sketches, including the sequence and ultimate number of drawn elements; the use of word labels, abbreviations or acronyms in descriptions; and the mapping strategy, orientation and scale of elements drawn; and 2) sketch content in terms of areas, nodes, edges, paths and landmarks (with special attention paid to elements that have personal significance ascribed to them). This study has applied two approaches to spatial knowledge. First, it was assumed that sketch maps

obtained are processual and representative (i.e., never complete, given their inevitable acquisition of new content as new spatial experiences are gained (Kitchin & Dodge, 2007).

### 3. Research results

#### 3.1. Defining rurality

When asked about what "rural:" means to them, study participants very strongly pointed to natural and ecological values, as well as functional features. To a lesser extent, they referred to traditional values and close relationships. Still, the combination of answers "I totally agree" and "I agree" makes all these categories strongly felt as crucial attributes of the countryside. This proves that the traditionally

conceived image of the village and the attributed advantages of rural living are still dominant. The ongoing process of migration of people to rural areas (especially those located close to cities) results from an interest in the countryside relating mainly to its aesthetic and visual features (nature, openness and beauty of landscape, isolation). Somewhat paradoxically, agriculture, and in particular its intensive modern version, often runs counter to the environmental values pursued by the immigrant population and is treated rather as an undesirable element that contrasts with the idyllic vision of rural living. Close social relations, though of general importance to the interviewees, can be interpreted as an optional feature, with the scope of ties seen as a flexible instrument complementing functioning in the rural environment (Fig. 2).

The above conclusions are largely confirmed by the structure of responses to the question regarding the most important features of interviewees' places of living. The predominance of responses emphasising the natural, landscape-related or functional specificity of the villages under analysis reflects a question seeking a definition of the forms and content assumed by spatial perceptions of rural areas in general. Interviewees were thus asked about the uniqueness of their neighbourhood, with nearly 65% answering that their place of residence is unique in at least some respects, and with 25% of indicated features being social in nature – in such a way as to strengthen the rank of social relations,

the family and neighbourhood. Nevertheless, in this case also, there was a highlighting of the dominant position in villages of valuable features of a natural or functional character.

### 3.2. Drawing the village

Irrespective of the scale and spatial scope of the area represented in the sketch, roads were drawn first and considered to be basic elements of the local settlement network. Along roads, study participants introduced additional elements, primarily of institutional and community-related nature, and often with functional and religious significance. Attention was also paid to facilities such as schools, stops of public transport, churches, chapels, fire stations or other services of general interest. Houses, the immediate neighbourhood and houses of relatives were of a complementary character. Sketches were then further supplemented by various environmental elements, not least forests or fields, though also at times such significant natural objects as: larger rivers, lakes or hills. In the case, the use was similar to that made of roads – as a spatial reference and support in achieving spatial orientation of elements drawn.

Interestingly, fields were rarely presented in the images of study participants. On the one hand, this was a response to the task of sketching the

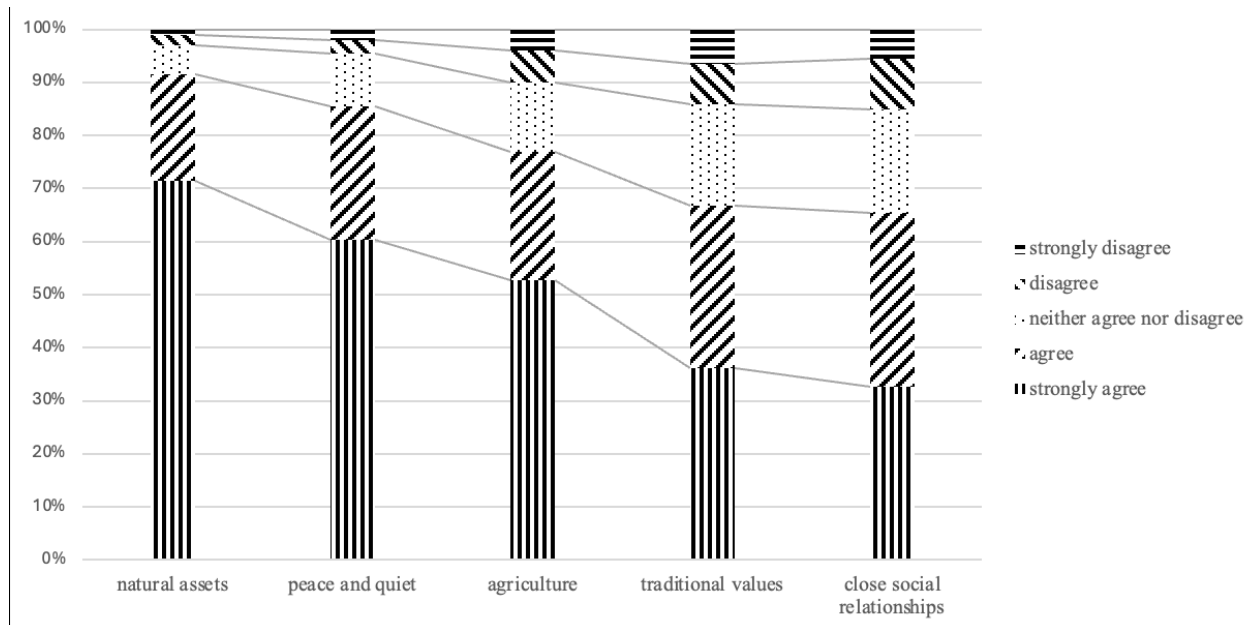


Fig. 2. Attributes of rural space, according to interviewees

village, apparently interpreted by interviewees as referring mainly to the settlement and its immediate surroundings (e.g., orchards and gardens). On the other hand, there is a possible indication of the functional and symbolic breakage of ties, given the progressive disappearance of the typically agricultural character once automatically ascribable to villages. Also, none of the freehand sketches obtained from study participants presented either people or animals. Such a dehumanisation together with the fragmentation and idealisation of represented reality is typical for postcard images (Kowalewski, 2007).

Sketches often comprise elements that facilitate the decoding of information contained. Indeed, interviewees completed their sketches with handwritten descriptions. On the one hand, such labels confirmed that a given shape of an object belonged to its type (e.g., as a road, field or chapel). On the other, the descriptions offered a kind of key included in the sketch and serving to systematise the content of perceptions. None of the sketches was supplied with a separate key, with this further attesting to interviewees' failure to heed any rules of professional map-making as they did their drawing. The spatial knowledge revealed in the form of a sketch was therefore tacit knowledge, while the entire drawing process was an experiment not preceded by any other relevant experience of the interviewees.

The clear majority (~70%) of spatial perceptions of a village taking the form of a drawing used a horizontal, two-dimensional perspective. The task of drawing a village determined to some extent the manner in which sketches were made, bearing in mind the suggested reference to the given settlement unit being presented in its entirety. In many cases they offered a broader orientation vis-à-vis other localities, natural objects and areas.

Most study participants chose to do their drawings in map-like form. Although each sketch was very much an individual matter, all the drawings contained a set of elements isomorphic with respect to the real system. The comparison of these mental structures allows for the definition of regularities of elements significant to the spatial perception of a village. Such an analysis allows conclusions to be drawn regarding the key places organising rural space. Individualism was much more apparent in sketches representing a street view or mixed perspective. There were few drawings of this type (fewer than 10% of the total), but these do represent an interesting case when it comes to places being seen. Such sketches, limited as they are to just some fragments of a given village (i.e. the centre, or a person's immediate neighbourhood), usually record spatial forms constituting the backdrop against which social relations are pursued (and taking the form of houses, farm buildings, fences, gates, fields, etc.), or else institutional relations (as places are used) (Fig. 3).

Analysis of sketch structure indeed revealed many regularities arising out of a subjective, and thus selective, perception of reality. Selectivity applies to the types of included objects, their sizes and the varied clarity of drawing. The size of an object in relation to its location on a sketch is an expression of a specific mental scale, whereby an indication of rank in relation to other elements included is given. Important objects of significance to the local community and interviewees themselves were placed centrally and "scaled" in relation to objects around them. Most frequent among objects attesting to a rural settlement's centre were schools, churches, fire stations, shops, community centres and clubs, as well as playgrounds. Depending on size of village, as well as rank determined by the presence of local institutions (functions), there were

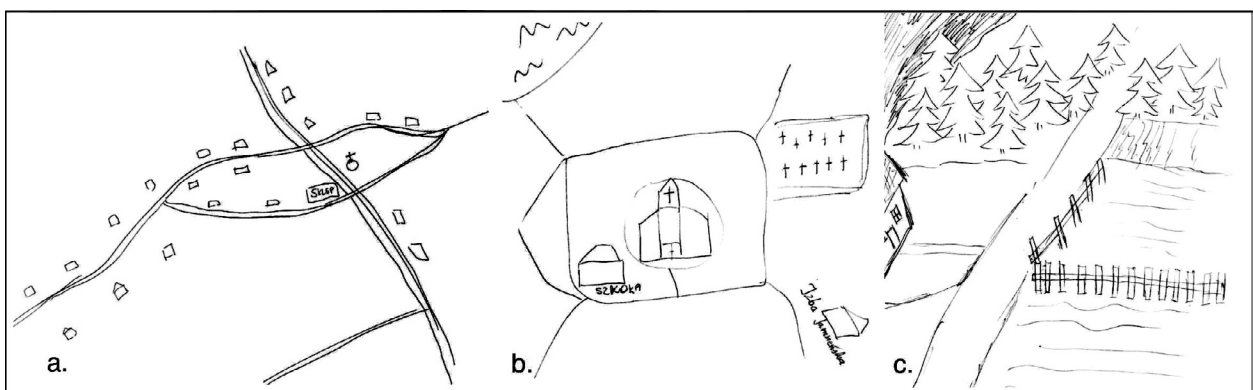


Fig. 3. Sketches assuming the form of: a) a map, b) a mixed perspective, c) a street view

varied numbers of such central elements. Bearing in mind how not every village even has such places, such indications further emphasise the importance they do have, given the concentration of movement and social or religious life, as well as the dominant position in the landscape.

More than half of all interviewees (52%) confirmed their view that it is perfectly possible to indicate village borders, and thus also an element or elements in the surrounding area that can be regarded as serving a delimiting function. About 59% of people mentioned objects in some sense serving formal/administrative goals, such as signs featuring the names of villages. A large group pointed to elements of spatial development, e.g. field boundaries or village limits. Where villages are of high natural diversity, it was possible (in 13.5% of cases) for reference to be made to the natural borders formed by rivers, lake shores, forest edges or elevation lines. Some interviewees identified village boundaries with the lines of buildings or roads surrounding the settlement. Only 8% of interviewed people focused their attention on the symbolic sphere, by referring to objects of religious worship, magical places, etc. (including roadside crosses, chapels, stones, trees, or other points characteristic for the villages under study).

Personalisation of the sketches was only identified in a few cases. The personal experiences and attitudes displayed towards places appear to a greater extent in a narrative way of describing current features, the past and the plausible future (Tobiasz-Lis & Wójcik, 2021). For most of the interviewees, sketching their village was a form of individual(ised) structuring of space (mental mapping), but there were cases

in which this technique triggered emotions and the recollection of experiences. Study participants focused primarily on those objects, as well as areas that co-create the essential framework and content for their own life and life in the community.

Personalisation of the sketch revolves primarily around the subordination of the drawing process to a specific story or the recollection of past events. In several cases, it took the form of an event from the past being assigned to a place, primarily from the point of view of an object dominated symbolically by the memory function. In these cases, the main types of objects involved were cemeteries, graves and monuments to war history, but also clearly-marked features of villages capable of distinguishing them regionally (Fig. 4).

What prove interesting in this context are the answers to questions as to knowledge of historical events that interviewees can place in the rural space or link to the history of the village. About 55% of study participants stated that they knew the history of their village. However, almost 40% could not point clearly to the source of that knowledge. The people who were aware of at least elementary facts from the history of their villages tended to have lived in that place since birth or had a long relationship with the given area. Thus, interviewees able to boast of such knowledge mainly represented the older or middle generations in local communities.

Sources of knowledge regarding village history did relate mostly to the passing-on of information at home and within the circle of neighbours and friends. Subsequently, this type of memory is cultivated within institutions, especially schools. It should be noted here that the reproduction of

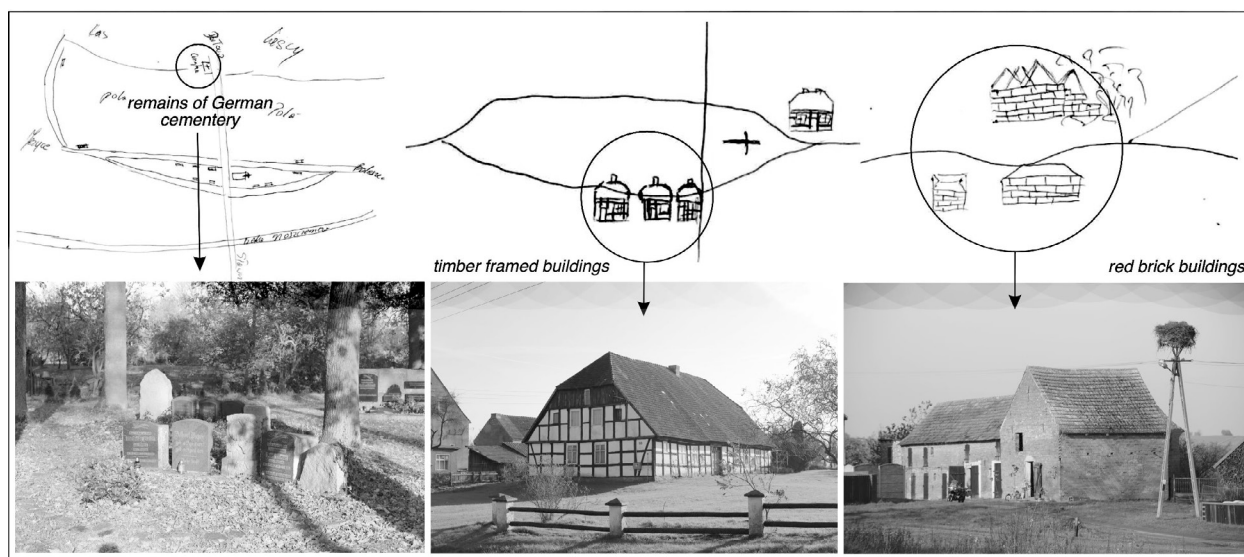


Fig. 4. Places of collective memory represented in sketches

memory more often takes place in larger rural settlements equipped with specific institutions of local long *durée* – a circumstance associated with, on the one hand, an accumulation of important past events and, on the other, a role for institutions in the transmitting of memory and preservation of local stories.

An interesting aspect relates to what has been remembered and, at the same time, what has become a constituent element of perception related to being rooted in a place. Several contexts could in fact be distinguished, of which the first concerned belonging to a specific historical and cultural region and, hence, acquisition of a perspective through which history might be both imagined and interpreted. These differences show clearly on the east–west axis of Poland and are mainly associated with the trauma of World War II. Villages in many regions experienced serious damage and, above all, the extermination of the local population. Likewise, resettlement and population exchange remained foremost in the minds of interviewees from rural areas of the so-called “recovered lands”. Still, it was only in general terms that interviewees noted how theirs had once been German villages. In this context, interviewees of the largest settlements highlighted the inheritance of places well-developed and wealthy in nature, with proficient agriculture, and thus a rich content as regards cultural landscape.

The second context related to the identified origins of villages, primarily a function of any overall (irregular or regular) shape preserved since the Middle Ages. In some cases, the reference to the Medieval period was related to information about the activities of monasteries, especially of the Cistercians. In turn, a third context relates to events whose story is passed on in the local community given that they were disasters that led to significant impoverishment or partial destruction. The reason might be, for example, flooding, epidemics or fires. A fourth context relates to local events first and foremost reflecting operations of local institutions like the Volunteer Fire Department or involving schools named after the heroes of battles against occupying forces.

An important aspect of the remembrance of the villages’ pasts relates events to places and objects that participants considered to be symbolic spaces. The former ethnic image was identified primarily with the material heritage of the cultural landscape, i.e. homesteads (and especially those with specific construction materials) and the remains of cemeteries. While the former have survived in many cases and are determinants of regional features,

the cemeteries often prove to be isolated spaces displaying features of ongoing degradation.

In turn, churches constitute a permanent element of territorial identification as not only objects of religious practice, but also points of reference by which space is marked with memory. Churches are thus tangible witnesses of history, unlike places like manors or granges, which have often been eliminated irretrievably from rural space – and even if not materially then symbolically, bringing the irrevocable loss of the social and cultural functions they once served.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Contemporary studies of spatial changes in the countryside are based largely on the concept of place and locality (Halfacree, 1993; 2007; Massey, 1996). Relevant work on that in the literature refers to the influence of neo-positivist ideas on the one hand, e.g. the concept of local resources and territorial capital (Bodnár, 2013; Bański, 2016; Sippel & Vissel, 2021) and, on the other, to many ideas favouring socially and culturally based ways of accounting for space, time and human life (Cloke, 1997; Woods, 2006; Holloway & Kneafsey, 2014).

The approach of focusing on the local dimension to phenomena, on social activity and the cultural landscape arising out of it, is not a recent discovery but, rather, something boasting a long tradition in human geography (Cloke, 1993; Cloke et al., 1994; Halfacree, 1993; Urry, 1995; Murdoch & Pratt, 1993). And a feature of many of the works in this field is that they look at the mechanism of spatial imagining and at its role in the way social and economic reality are understood (Tessier et al., 2021). What is interesting here is the explicit belief that people, local communities and institutions are rooted in local spaces. Progressive changes in the perceptions of “rurality” thus reflect a series of processes encouraging an ever-more extensive pluralism of “rurality” reflected directly in today’s “post-rural” landscape (Hopkins, 1998).

What needs highlighting is the way that perceptions of place represent one form of tacit knowledge capable of revealing in a symbolic sense the socially produced environment (Soja, 1996). Traditionally arising out of the relationship between society and nature, now it is also shaped by the contemporary processes of civilisation (global and regional development). By uncovering knowledge of this kind, we generate much varied information proving of value as contemporary rural lifestyles are interpreted (Cloke, 1993; Urry, 1995). Researchers



are able to look at rural space and the local community from the point of view of inhabitants (for whom a given village is of special importance and a place identified with in everyday life). And through direct conversations with inhabitants, as well as the application of the research techniques referred to, it proves possible to better understand the processes whereby tacit knowledge of a place accumulates.

Firstly, awareness of cultural heritage seems to be greater, even as (secondly) old cultural landscapes are in the process of disappearing, certainly giving way to new ones – albeit ones not necessarily relating to rural tradition. The landscape forms in rural areas are now mixed – as the result of a growing diversity of attitudes and values, but also of lifestyles actually adopted (Melucci, 1998). The deagrarianisation of the countryside, already something of a *fait accompli* in countries of the Global North and now also characterising most economies of the Global South, has done much to erode the relationship between human beings and nature (Peritz & Carr, 2021; Rockenbach & Sakdapolrak, 2017). In agrarian societies, the relationship with nature first determined possibilities for biological survival, before going on to specify magical and religious perceptions of the world (Eliade, 1970; Niczyporuk, 2002). The new domination of non-productive functions and growing importance of villages as residential spaces indeed denotes changed perceptions of the living environment, including in the immediate surroundings where people live (Marsden, 1999).

Therefore, in practical terms, research of the above kind can be viewed as helpful in planning villages, especially in these times of declining numbers of inhabitants actively engaged in farming. This means the marginalisation of the once-dominant role of agriculture in creating social and functional bonds. Freehand sketches used in this study in parallel with traditional survey research, can help with identification of the main problems of local development, as these relate to the social aspect – making it clear how legible the structures of rural space now are for inhabitants in the face and context of ongoing cultural and social changes observed in the countryside.

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