

DEGRADATION OF POLISH MANOR HOUSES – ANALYSIS OF TECHNICAL, LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE FACTORS AFFECTING THE STATE OF PRESERVATION OF HISTORICAL SUBSTANCE

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Abstract

The article addresses the problem of degradation of Polish manors as an important element of cultural heritage. Based on the analysis of three cases (Czepurka, Konary and Rębow), the influence of technical, legal, administrative-financial and socio-cultural factors on their state of preservation is discussed. A qualitative approach was used, using document analysis, interviews and technical evaluation. It was pointed out that the lack of flexibility of conservation guidelines, the complexity of procedures and limited financial support hinder revitalization. In turn, the lack of entry in the register results in a lack of legal protection, which leads to degradation of the facilities. The article emphasizes the need to change the approach to the protection of monuments, combining the protection of substances with their contemporary use and cooperation between investors and conservation services.

Keywords: Polish manor houses; Monument protection; Architectural conservation; Degradation factors; Case study

Introduction

Historic manor houses, scattered across the Polish landscape, are a valuable cultural heritage and a testimony to ancient socio-economic structures. Their preservation and adaptation to contemporary functions, however, is a process fraught with many difficulties [1].

The contemporary state of preservation of manors in Poland is the result of various overlapping social, economic and political processes. A key factor was the transformation of ownership structures after World War II, especially the effects of the agrarian reform of 1944, which led to the abandonment or change of function of many manors and palaces. Civilizational changes have resulted in the gradual displacement of historic architecture by new buildings, better adapted to the growing needs of residents and modern living standards [2]. Financial difficulties also proved to be a significant problem – the conservation of monuments often requires significant expenditure due to the need to use expensive materials and specialist technologies. Adapting historic buildings to new functions without compromising their structural integrity can be extremely complicated [3]. In addition, the owners' low level of commitment to preserving the historic substance and unsettled ownership issues – especially

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when the facility has many co-owners – effectively hinder the necessary security and renovation works [4, 5].

To better understand the significance of these structures and the scale of the problem of their degradation, it is worth taking a closer look at what the manor house was like and how it developed in Poland. A manor house is a traditional landed gentry residence, usually single-story, with modest architecture. It developed in Poland for almost a thousand years. From the 10th to the mid-17th century, defensive fortifications and Renaissance castles – the residences of knights – were built. Then, from the mid-17th century to the end of the 18th century, manor houses were built – rural residences of the nobility. From the end of the 18th century until 1863, classicist manors dominated. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the architecture of manors was influenced by historicism and eclecticism, as well as the development of the manor style, visible, among others, in hunting manors and rectories. The manors were surrounded by farm buildings, gardens, ponds and orchards and their functioning was based on landed estates. Within the borders of present-day Poland, about 2,500 manor houses have survived, although in the interwar period there were about 15,000 of them [6]. World War II brought about the extermination of many landed gentry families, which contributed, among other things, to the decline of court culture. After 1945, many manor houses, like other landed estates, were allocated for social purposes, such as schools, community centers or libraries. Some have been converted into multi-family buildings. The function assigned at that time determined the transformations and level of maintenance of individual monuments and their fate after 1989.

The basic action towards endangered historic buildings, including manor houses, should be to eliminate the causes of the threat and ensure the durability of the interventions carried out. This requires carrying out conservation works, securing appropriate financing and giving them a permanent functional use consistent with the nature of the monument. This is a key direction of activities enabling the preservation of the historic substance for future generations [7].

In order to properly determine the level of risk, it is necessary to know the reasons and scope of the facility's conservation protection. In practice, such information is often missing, which makes effective planning and prioritization of activities difficult.

In many cases, conservation protection, instead of supporting the maintenance of the historic substance, in practice leads to the complete abandonment of renovation plans by investors, which results in further degradation of these facilities.

The aim of this article is to show the scale of the problem using the example of three manors: Czepurek Manor (Silesian Voivodeship), Konary Manor (Lesser Poland Voivodeship) and Rębowo Manor (Gdańsk, Pomeranian Voivodeship). The analysis allows us to draw attention to the real administrative, conservation and technical barriers, which in some cases contribute to their progressive destruction. This article is an attempt to diagnose the real obstacles that prevent the effective preservation of this type of cultural heritage.

The importance of manors in Polish cultural heritage

Manors are an important element of the Polish cultural landscape. They performed residential, economic and administrative functions, being local centers for managing landed estates. In many cases, their importance went beyond the economic sphere – they built regional identity and shaped the social structure of rural areas.

In the Polish tradition, manors also played an important cultural and symbolic role. They were centers of intellectual and patriotic life, especially during the partitions and the fight for independence, when the nobility often organized clandestine activities there and cultivated

Polish national traditions. Manors were places where art, literature and music were cultivated and values related to Polishness, an honorable lifestyle and social responsibility were passed on to subsequent generations.

The architecture of the manors, although more modest than that of castles or palaces, reflected local building traditions and was adapted to Polish climatic and economic conditions. Thanks to this, manor houses remain distinct elements of the regional landscape, strengthening the sense of belonging and bond with the native landscape [1]. Elements such as the spatial layout, the building materials used and the composition of the park layouts testify to the high technical and artistic culture of past eras.

Nowadays, many manor houses no longer serve their original functions – they are unused or in poor technical condition. Their thoughtful adaptation to new functions could not only contribute to the protection of the historic substance but also help to maintain the continuity of the historical cultural landscape. However, these processes often encounter legal, administrative and economic barriers that prevent effective revitalization of facilities.

Methodology

The article is based on the analysis of three case studies of Polish manor houses – Czepurek, Konary and Rębowo – in which actions were taken to adapt or protect the historic substance. The research included the following:

- analysis of design, conservation and administrative documentation in accordance with the principles of content analysis,
- interviews with investors, owners and representatives of conservation services,
- assessment of the technical condition of facilities based on on-site inspections and analysis of archival technical documentation [8].

A case study strategy was used, enabling an in-depth analysis of revitalization processes and technical, legal and organizational barriers in specific local contexts [9, 10]. A qualitative approach was adopted, focusing on the identification of technical, legal and administrative barriers affecting the effectiveness of revitalization activities. The results of the applied research methods and data sources are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of research methods and data sources used in the analysis of the degradation of Polish manors

Research item	Description of the methodology used	Data sources	Purpose of use
Case study	Analysis of three selected manors (Czepurka, Konary, Rębowo)	Design documentation, site visits, archives	Identification of technical, legal and financial barriers in the revitalization process
Document content analysis	Analysis of conservation decisions, adaptation projects and administrative letters Conversations with owners, investors and representatives of conservation services	Administrative and conservation documentation	Assessment of the impact of regulations on the possibility of carrying out adaptation works
Interviews		Individual interviews	Gaining a practical perspective on barriers and difficulties in the investment process
Technical condition assessment	Site visits and structural damage analysis	Field inspections, technical reports	Verification of the actual state of preservation of the historic substance

Source: Own study based on field research.

Characteristics of selected objects and their state of preservation

Czepurek Manor (Silesian Voivodeship)

The Czepurek Manor, dating back to the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, is characterized by a modest classicist architectural form, typical of rural areas of that period [11]. It was entered into the register of immovable monuments in 1989. The building is characterized by a rectangular plan, a symmetrical façade and a gable roof. The structure of the building is based on limestone and brick walls, using local building materials. The oldest part of the building is the basement, topped with brick barrel vaults – an example of the high-class construction craftsmanship of the era. Above the cradle, several dozen years later, a ground floor development was built along with an unused attic and the newest part is the kitchen annex.

The manor house has been in poor technical condition for years despite the preparation of design documentation and obtaining the necessary permits. The current state of the manor is shown in figure 1. The key problem turned out to be the high investment costs, which were additionally increased due to strict conservation guidelines [12]. An example is the position of the conservator of monuments, who requires the restoration of the existing walls and roof truss - even though these elements are in a state of extreme degradation. The cost of renovation is then many times more expensive than reconstruction using traditional technologies. The designer proposed a compromise solution - full restoration of the most valuable element, the historic basement and reconstruction of the damaged walls and roof while maintaining their historic appearance. The conservator's lack of consent to the proposed compromise led to a significant increase in costs, which made it impossible to obtain financing. As a result, the facility continues to deteriorate.



Fig. 1. Current condition of the manor house - 2022, from the left: northern elevation, front elevation (western)

Manor house in Konary (Lesser Poland Voivodeship)

The manor house in Konary (Fig. 2), also known as the Grabowski manor house complex, was built in 1920 [13]. In 1988, the building was entered into the register of immovable monuments of the Małopolska Voivodeship. It is believed that the current building was built on the site of an earlier manor house. After the war, it housed an agricultural school and then a production cooperative. The building has a wooden and brick structure and the character of a villa. It was built on a rectangular plan, has a basement and is covered with a mansard roof decorated with dormers. The lower floor, including the basement, was made of stone. The sections above the basement were made in a wooden structure, which gives the building lightness and visual elegance. The building is distinguished by a projection on the

south side and concrete fan-shaped stairs leading to the main entrance. After the war, the interiors were rebuilt to suit the needs of the production cooperative.

The manor house in Konary is another example of a facility with great potential that was not used due to the restrictive approach of the conservation services. Within the park area, a concept was created to build a wedding hall and a hotel for guests. This was to enable the generation of revenue to support the maintenance of the facility. The main problem was the refusal to consent to changes in the layout of the rooms in the existing historic structure. The change was necessary due to modern requirements related to evacuation and fire regulations. The conservator did not allow the construction of a new glass-covered hall in the park area, which – although designed with respect for the historical layout – could have ensured the functional and financial self-sufficiency of the entire complex. The lack of compromise between the parties led to the investor withdrawing from the project and the further sale of the manor house. The manor house, unadapted and unused, is falling into further disrepair, remaining another example of wasted potential of cultural heritage.



Fig. 2. Current condition of the manor - 2017, north elevation. (photo by Ewa Brandys, source: polskiezybytki.pl)

Manor house in Rębowo (Pomeranian Voivodeship, Gdańsk)

The manor house in Rębowo (Fig. 3), located on the outskirts of Gdańsk, was built in the early 18th century [14]. It was designed as a landed gentry residence, in accordance with the manor and farm layout typical of the Gdańsk region.

The building represents a simplified classicist style – it has a rectangular plan, a symmetrical facade and a low, gable roof. The manor house was built on the foundations of an older residence. Ceramic bricks were used for its construction. The building is divided into two parts: the western part – higher and with a basement and a wooden porch, which contains architectural elements that may date back to the 18th century. The eastern part of the building was built in the interwar period and has a simplified functional character. In 2022, the building was partially destroyed by fire. In 2024, the procedure for entering the manor house into the register of immovable monuments of the Pomeranian Voivodeship was initiated. The initiation of the

proceedings results in the facility being placed under temporary conservation protection, which is associated with a ban on carrying out any work that may damage the historic substance or historical appearance of the facility.



Fig. 3. Devastated manor house in Rębowo (2007) – front view.
(Photo by Tomasz Steifer, source: [wikipedia.org/wiki/Rębowo_\(Gdańsk\)](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Rębowo_(Gdańsk)))

The manor house in Rębowo is an example of a building of significant historical value that for years remained outside formal conservation protection. The lack of entry in the register of monuments made it impossible to use legal tools to protect the historic substance and to enforce basic security measures from the owner [15].

The case of the manor house in Rębowo illustrates the risk associated with the lack of entry in the register of monuments. In such situations, there is no mechanism that would oblige the owner to take the necessary actions to protect the historic substance from progressive destruction.

Factors influencing the degradation of Polish manors

The reasons for the degradation of Polish manors are complex and multifaceted—they include historical, political and economic conditions, as well as the natural processes of destruction of building materials. Understanding the mechanisms leading to the degradation of these sites allows us not only to more fully grasp their history but also to develop more effective strategies for their protection and revitalization.

The analysis of the presented examples allows us to distinguish three main groups of factors that have a decisive influence on the deteriorating technical condition of Polish manors (Table 2). These include technical, legal and administrative-financial problems. In many cases, these factors occur simultaneously, amplifying the degrading effect.

Technical factors

The degradation of manors results from the age of the buildings, the materials used and the (traditional) technologies in which they were built [16, 17]. The damage that occurred included, among others, foundation subsidence, wall scratches, roof truss degradation and destruction of window and door joinery. In many cases, the lack of previous conservation work and many years of technical neglect lead to deepening structural problems. Another significant

limitation is conservation guidelines, which often do not allow the use of modern and technologically effective protection methods, such as external insulation or replacing severely damaged elements with new ones.

Table 2. Main groups of factors influencing the degradation of the analyzed manors

Group of factors	Characteristic	Examples of influence on objects	Possible corrective actions
Technical	Degradation of building structures related to their age and original construction technologies	Damp walls, cracks in foundations, damage to roof trusses	Regular technical inspections, use of appropriate repair technologies in accordance with conservation guidelines
Legal (conservatorship)	Restrictive guidelines for the protection of monuments, limitations in adaptation to new utility functions	Lack of consent to changes in interior layout, difficulties in adapting facilities to fire safety regulations	Introduction of negotiation mechanisms between the investor and the conservation services, flexible approach in adaptation design
Administrative and financial	Long administrative procedures, lack of access to effective sources of financing for owners	Delays in project implementation, abandonment of investment plans	Simplification of procedures, introduction of a system of subsidies and tax relief for owners of historic monuments

Source: Own study based on field research.

Legal (conservation) factors

In the case of buildings entered in the register of monuments, the investor is obliged to obtain the consent of the conservator for all construction and renovation works. However, conservation guidelines often remain inflexible, which makes it impossible to adapt the facility to contemporary utility requirements, including fire safety, evacuation and sanitary regulations. The requirement to preserve the historic interior layout and architectural details, although justified from the perspective of heritage protection, may in practice completely block the possibility of using (adapting) the facility. The lack of effective negotiation mechanisms between the investor and the conservator (in some cases) results in the abandonment of the investment or a significant delay in the works.

Administrative and financial factors

Lengthy administrative procedures, lack of transparent rules of cooperation between monument protection authorities and investors and limited access to financing sources constitute barriers to taking action to save the degraded tissue [17]. The situation of private owners is particularly problematic as they cannot count on real financial support and, at the same time, are burdened with full responsibility for the maintenance of the facility.

Another important aspect is the situation of buildings of historical value that are not included in the register of monuments. In such cases, there are no legal mechanisms obliging the owner to take protective measures. The example of the Manor House in Rębowo shows that formally unprotected objects remain beyond administrative control, which leads to uncontrolled degradation and, in extreme cases, the complete destruction of the historical substance.

All the factors indicated, both technical, legal, administrative and financial, are of a systemic nature. Their combined impact effectively blocks the possibility of effective protection and adaptation of Polish manors, increasing the risk of losing these buildings in the coming decades.

Conflict of interests – protection of a monument and utility needs

The analysis of the presented cases shows the existence of a conflict between the protection of monuments and the possibility of their adaptation to contemporary functionalities. In many situations, the protection of historic substances is implemented in a very restrictive manner, without taking into account the economic realities and the requirements of modern safety and functionality standards.

In the case of Czepurka Manor, the rigid requirements for the restoration of the severely degraded walls and roof truss, instead of allowing their reconstruction while maintaining the historic appearance, significantly increased the investment costs. This approach, coupled with the lack of flexibility on the part of the conservation services, made it impossible to obtain financing and halted the revitalization process.

The example of the Manor House in Konary shows that the lack of consent to any changes to the layout of the rooms, despite the need to adapt the facility to fire safety and evacuation regulations, led to the blocking of investment opportunities. As a result, the owner was forced to abandon the idea of adapting the building for a hotel function and sell the facility, which remained unused and was subject to further deterioration.

In turn, the example of the Manor House in Rębowo shows the opposite situation, in which the lack of any formal protection results in the complete degradation of the object. In such cases, there is no legal mechanism that would oblige the owner to take basic security measures.

All the described cases confirm that effective protection of monuments cannot be limited solely to formal and legal requirements regarding the historical substance. Protection should also take into account the possibility of commercial use of the facility and real economic conditions. The lack of such an approach leads to a situation in which formally protected monuments are subject to physical destruction because their adaptation becomes economically impossible.

The conflict between conservation protection and functional adaptation requires a change in the manner of conducting dialogue between the investor and the monument protection authorities. It is crucial to develop negotiation and compromise mechanisms that will enable the implementation of revitalization projects while respecting both historical values and the contemporary needs of users.

Conclusions

The analysis of selected examples of Polish manor houses shows that the degradation of such facilities results from overlapping technical, legal, administrative and financial problems. In many cases, these factors operate simultaneously, preventing effective rescue or adaptation actions.

The examples presented in the article – Czepurek Manor, Konary Manor and Rębowo Manor – illustrate various mechanisms leading to the degradation of historic buildings. In the case of manors under conservation protection, the biggest problem seems to be the lack of flexibility in the guidelines regarding the scope of possible renovation and adaptation works. The requirement to fully preserve the historic layout, without the possibility of compromising technological and functional solutions, often leads to investors abandoning their revitalization plans. As a result, these facilities, despite formal protection, remain unused and are subject to further destruction.

The case of the Manor House in Rębowo shows that the lack of entry in the register of monuments and thus the lack of obligation to carry out basic security works leads to the progressive

destruction of the historical substance. The lack of early response mechanisms for objects of potential historic value but not covered by formal protection is a significant systemic problem.

The conclusions drawn from the analysis indicate the need to introduce changes in the approach to the protection of monuments. It is necessary to develop tools that will enable negotiations between the investor and the monument protection authorities in order to work out compromise solutions. The key should be to preserve the most valuable elements of the historical substance while taking into account utilitarian and economic needs.

The protection of cultural heritage should not be limited to protecting the physical structure of objects. Contemporary protection of monuments should also include the creation of realistic conditions for their use, which is a key element of their long-term survival. Only an integrated approach, combining conservation protection with the possibility of functioning of the facility in contemporary realities, provides a chance for effective revitalization of Polish manors and preserving them for future generations.

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