

## Article

# Attractiveness of Central Public Spaces in Small Polish Towns Based on a Spatial Order Analysis

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to evaluate the attractiveness of centrally located public spaces (main squares) in select new small towns in Poland. The evaluation was conducted from the spatial order perspective. Spatial order is composed of five elements: architectural and urban planning, functional, aesthetic, social, and “green” orders. The new small towns included in this analysis are settlement units, which in 2020 were populated by up to 20,000 inhabitants and received municipal rights in the 21st century. We used the point bonitation method in our research based on the source material collected during a field study. A total of 286 inventory cards of buildings and nine cards of town squares were compiled. The analysis demonstrated that the main squares in the towns studied are characterised by low or average levels of attractiveness from the spatial order perspective. The architectural–urban planning order in the towns in question was related to the number of inhabitants as well as the period over which a given settlement unit had municipal rights. A larger number of inhabitants had a positive influence on the functional diversification of the central squares and their development, whereas a small number limited both the functional diversification and the number of small architectural elements found at the square. The social order in the given towns was not connected to the number of inhabitants. The elements of social order were assessed favourably, both in larger towns that revitalised their central squares and in smaller settlements. The aesthetic and green orders were strongly related to the revitalisation of public space.

**Keywords:** public space; town square; small towns; spatial order; Poland



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## 1. Introduction

Public spaces have always been a significant element of urban tissue [1]. Take the Greek agora, the Roman forum, or the Italian piazza as examples. However, as pointed out by Jalaladini and Oktay [2], studies on them have been neglected for a long time, mostly due to the adverse effects of urban planning. Those effects became particularly visible in the 20th century, when towns were built and developed to cater to the needs of growing vehicle traffic rather than to satisfy human needs [2–4]. We should keep in mind that “towns are places where people meet to share ideas, trade or simply rest” [5]. Public spaces are areas of social interactions [2,6]. Therefore, in the second half of the 20th century, many urban planners started to take the human dimension of public spaces into consideration [4]. Such a social approach to public spaces focused the scientific debate around actions aiming to increase their attractiveness and, as a consequence, to improve the quality of life for local inhabitants.

Ever since ancient times, public urban spaces have been used for political, military, economic, religious, and sports purposes [7]. Perhaps that is why various authors believe that public space is a basic factor used to confirm the urban character of a place and that a town or city cannot exist without shared, commonly accessible spaces [2,4,8]. Naturally, the forms, arrangement, and functions of public spaces have changed over time [9,10]. Nowadays, they are primarily used for leisure purposes [11].

Despite its long history, public space has several commonly accepted definitions, which probably resulted from the different perspectives taken by researchers from different fields of science [12] as well as from the diversity of these spaces [13]. For instance, Walzer [14] claimed that public spaces are spaces we share with people we do not know and who are not our relatives, friends, or co-workers, whereas Tibbalds [15] believed that public space is constituted by all parts of urban tissue to which the community has unlimited access. Lorens [16] (p. 83) understood this concept as “a fragment of space which, through the way it is organized and located within the urban structure, is used to enable the participants of social life to communicate directly and to fulfil other social needs of the community, remaining at the same time physically accessible for all those interested”.

Many authors stress that public spaces characterise the identity and functions of a settlement unit [17], represent the inhabitants’ standard of living, create the town’s image, and make it more attractive for tourism, settlement, and investment [18–21].

Public spaces are created by many actors: politicians, self-governing activists, architects and planners, residents, and tourists. Public spaces consist of two subsystems: an urban system—consisting of material, anthropogenic, and natural elements of the town, and a social system—consisting of users of the town and their needs, opinions, and perceptions [8].

From the social point of view, public spaces should be accessible, fair, and safe and should ensure comfort and pleasure [4]. In the literature, we can find concepts of physical and visual accessibility [4]. Physical accessibility enables people to enter public spaces without difficulty and to take advantage of its functions, whereas visual accessibility makes watching everything happening in a given space easier [2]. Fairness of a public space means that it has features such that it can fulfil the needs of various social groups [22]. A safe public space protects its users from physical harm (natural disasters, car accidents, and crime) and also provides them with psychological safety (privacy, and not feeling socially or physically lost) [2,11,22]. A properly designed public space should allow a user to walk (walking space, a lack of physical obstacles, good-quality pavements and alleys for walking), sit (zones for sitting and benches to rest on), stand and stay (structures to lean against), look around (reasonable visual distances with open, interesting views and lighting at dusk), speak and listen (low levels of noise), and play and exercise (facilities for physical activity, working out, and playing). The users’ pleasure should come from positive sensual impressions (good design and details, beautiful views, trees, plants, and water) [4].

Thus, public spaces should be functionally diversified, i.e., users can perform various activities.

Research on public spaces in towns of different sizes has shown that the accessibility and functionality of these spaces should theoretically be the same or at least similar. In practice, regarding both accessibility and functionality, as well as the aesthetic and ecological aspects, the differences are so large that they form the specific character of public spaces in small towns [23,24]. Generally, the accessibility of central public spaces in small towns is better than that in large urban centres due to urban centres being large and heavily populated [25]. Additionally, the level of functionality in public spaces in small towns is lower than that in large and medium-sized towns [26,27].

Although the literature on the subject provides relatively abundant knowledge about public spaces in large cities [28,29] and medium-sized towns [30,31], they are rarely discussed with respect to small towns [23]. We must not ignore the fact that small towns also make up a significant part of national and regional settlement units in many European countries.

For instance, in Poland, in 2019 there were 722 small towns populated by under 20,000 inhabitants, at 22% of the urban population. After World War II, as a result of dynamic socioeconomic phenomena, small towns underwent multidimensional transformations. Cities with large industrial plants or towns situated close to large factory complexes usually flourished, whereas small, peripheral towns or towns without any sig-

nificant economic functions fell into states of regression or stagnation [32]. The economic situation had an impact, primarily, on the development and functioning of public spaces. In many small towns, we could observe degradation of the housing tissue and reductions in the functions of public spaces. Only after 1989 (the period of transition from a centrally controlled economy to a market economy and the rebirth of territorial self-government) could we observe a change in attitude towards shaping public spaces in small Polish towns. Local authorities undertook activities aiming to transform the main squares—often devastated and visually unattractive parts of towns—into well-kept areas, satisfying the needs of the local population and revitalising the town. The process was accelerated, on the one hand, due to Poland's accession to the European Union, which provided towns with EU funds for the revitalisation of select spaces, and on the other hand, due to the development of tourism and the resulting necessity to take care of the image of settlement units.

Public spaces may take various forms: a point (an object), a ribbon (a street or the seashore), or an area (a town square or a park). However, in the case of small towns, the town squares have the greatest influence on their identity due to their size and central location. Town squares are where several functions come together: trade, services, housing, administration, and cultural and religious functions [24].

The present spatial order of public spaces is largely related to the historical and economic conditions as well as the demographic potential and location of small urban centres. In towns where the historical (medieval) location of central squares has been preserved, revitalisation, made available with sufficient financial means, helped raise the aesthetic and functional values of the public spaces [33]. In such cases, the old town architecture generally has a positive impact on visual appeal due to the historical heritage of the town square [17]. However, even in such towns, we focus on the limited functionality of buildings, poor aesthetics, and undesirable use of public space (e.g., changing green surfaces into carparks) [17,33].

The relationship between the quality of public spaces in small towns and the level of economic development and location was presented in the study conducted by Konecka-Szydłowska [34]. When studying small towns in the agglomeration of Poznań, she noted that the inhabitants were highly satisfied with the accessibility and functionality of public spaces. This is only natural because a high level of economic development generates high incomes for a given city [35,36], which can be spent on revitalisation and transforming public spaces in accordance with the requirements of a modern society [37–40]. We also stress that people inhabiting small towns situated within the area of influence of huge urban agglomerations are better educated than those in peripheral towns and are more aware of the possibility of satisfying their needs [36,41,42]. The pressure exerted on local authorities with regard to shaping public spaces makes it possible to satisfy the expectations of local communities [25,43]. On the other hand, towns situated on the peripheries and with a modest population potential have underdeveloped public spaces. They are characterised by low functionality, related to the services used by rural inhabitants rather than by urban inhabitants [44–47]. The public space of such towns is used primarily to accommodate businesses providing basic services [48,49]. Additional services occur sporadically, which is natural, because for every settlement unit to develop economically, a minimum population potential is needed: on the one hand, a market, and on the other hand, a work force [50,51].

What is interesting from a cognitive point of view are the changes in the functions and development of the main squares in the settlement units that lost and regained municipal rights (in Poland, a town is a settlement unit that possesses municipal rights, granted administratively by the Council of Ministers. The decision to give a town this status is based on five criteria. The main one is the number of inhabitants. As a rule, a town should have a minimum of 2000 inhabitants. However, in practice, many exceptions to this rule exist. An important exception is having been granted municipal rights in the past. The remaining criteria include the following: at least 60% of inhabitants must make their living from non-agricultural activity, urban areas of the town should not have farming buildings, a separate centre should be identifiable, and the necessary technical infrastructure, i.e., water

and sewage systems, should be available). In such towns, the attractiveness of the public spaces is particularly important to inhabitants who typically develop close interpersonal relationships based on their knowledge of places and local communities [21,52].

In light of the remarks above, the purpose of this article is to evaluate the attractiveness of central public spaces (town squares) in select new small towns in Poland. The new small towns presented in the article are settlement units that received municipal rights in the 21st century and are populated by up to 20,000 inhabitants.

The attractiveness of town squares as public spaces was evaluated in the form of an expert assessment on the basis of direct observations (a field study). The evaluation was made from a spatial order perspective, including five elements: architectural–urban planning, functional, aesthetic, social, and green (ecological) orders. At this stage of the study, the inhabitants' opinions or needs were not considered. These will be the objects of further research.

We assumed that a town square is the town's central square surrounded by buildings [53], which consists of the surface of the town square as well as shared zones, i.e., public streets and pavements running along the edges of the town square, including the accompanying infrastructure [26].

The specific objectives of the article include evaluating the spatial order of the main squares in select new small towns in Poland and rating the architectural–urban planning, functional, social, aesthetic, and green orders, and evaluating the attractiveness of the town squares in select new small towns in Poland.

The article also has a practical purpose. The collected empirical material, if supplemented with the opinions of public space users (inhabitants and tourists) may provide a basis for introducing changes in the spatial order of the town squares in question in order to raise the attractiveness of public spaces in general. In addition, we provide further directions in the research on public spaces in small urban centres.

The results presented below fill the gap in the research on the functions and attributes of public space in units that, for decades, have functioned as rural areas, with predominantly agricultural functions.

## 2. Research Area

The study included nine Polish towns in Świętokrzyskie province (Figure 1), which is one of the few regions in Poland where the rural population is larger than the urban population. It is among the smallest and least developed regions in the country (Eastern Poland), with the lowest socioeconomic development indexes in the whole European Union. In order to decrease the differences between Eastern Poland and the remaining parts of the EU, a special development program was launched (Eastern Poland). Another characteristic feature of the province is a poorly developed settlement network. In 2019, 44 towns, 39 of which were small towns, were populated by under 20,000 people. The number of towns and their sizes in this region are unfavourable. According to research, urban centres have a considerable influence on the economic development of the surrounding rural areas, and the larger the town, the stronger and more widespread the influence [32,51]. Świętokrzyskie province is an example of a region where the development of rural areas is artificially reinforced by granting municipal rights to small settlement units.

The towns in question share several characteristic features. First, they all belong to a group of small (very small) destinations. In 2020, the number of inhabitants ranged from 338 in Opatowiec to 3167 in Radoszyce (Table 1). This group includes the two smallest towns in Poland: Opatowiec and Wiślica (515 inhabitants). Second, all of the settlement units in question have already been given the status of a town in the past. The towns granted municipal rights the earliest (13th century) were Nowy Korczyn, Koprzywnica, and Opatowiec, whereas the one granted municipal rights the latest (16th century) was Daleszyce. Third, all of the destinations in question lost their municipal rights in the 19th century (1869–1870) due to a tsar's edict, as punishment for participating in the January Uprising (at that time, Poland had been partitioned). The towns in question were

situated in the Kingdom of Poland, which was connected to the Russian Empire due to a personal union).



**Figure 1.** The location of the towns studied in Poland and Świętokrzyskie province. Source: authors' own elaboration.

The studied settlement units functioned as towns for several hundred years. Such a long period enhanced urban features, and the towns developed some functional ties with the vicinity, mostly providing services for their agricultural hinterland [54]. Due to the short distances between them, the towns required services for only a small area, which hampered their growth. Some of them performed other important functions. For instance, Wiślica was a centre for Polish nobility assemblies and Nowy Korczyn was where general councils of Małopolska province started to gather in the 15th century [54]. Nowadays, these places perform mainly administrative and service functions; however, some of them have well-developed tourism (Nowa Słupia and Wiślica).

Another common feature between these settlements is that they regained their municipal rights in the 21st century. First, Daleszyce was reinstated as a town (2007); then, Stopnica was reinstated (2015). The remaining destinations obtained their status as a town in 2018–2019. This means that the majority of the urban units studied have been functioning as towns for only the last three to four years.

It is also worth mentioning that these towns struggle with demographic problems. Since they regained their municipal rights, their population has decreased (a drop by 2–3%) due to natural loss and migration outflow [32]. The shrinking of the demographic potential



decreases the level of entrepreneurship, which, in turn, results in smaller incomes and multiple social problems [35]. In addition, population ageing has become evident. In 2020, the percentage of people at the post-productive age (65+) exceeded 20% in most towns, with the only exception being Daleszyce, where senior citizens made up slightly under 19%. In contrast, in Opatowiec, nearly every third resident was at a post-productive age.

**Table 1.** Basic information about the studied towns.

Town	Population in the Year in Which They Regained Their Municipal Rights	Population in 2020	Population Dynamics (%)	Period Granted Municipal Rights in the Past	Year in Which Municipal Rights Were Regained	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )
Daleszyce	2936	2856	97.3	1569–1869	2007	15.5
Koprzywnica	2488	2431	97.7	1268–1869	2018	17.9
Łągów	1587	1543	97.2	1375–1870	2018	8.2
Nowa Słupia	1373	1356	98.8	1351–1869	2019	14.0
Nowy Korczyn	938	904	96.4	1258–1869	2019	7.5
Opatowiec	338	336	99.4	1271–1869	2019	5.5
Radoszyce	3167	3095	97.7	1370–1870	2018	17.2
Stopnica	1455	1414	97.2	1362–1869	2015	4.6
Wiślica	515	506	98.3	1326–1870	2018	4.7

Source: data from the Local Data Bank (Central Statistical Office) and provided by town and *gmina* offices.

### 3. Materials and Methods

This study was divided into three stages: literature review, spatial order analysis, and a catalogue of town squares. The first stage involved studying the literature on the subject: public space planning in small towns, the functions and attributes of public space, and the methods of examining it. Based on the above, the aims of this work and the research questions were formulated.

The second stage involved establishing a set of indicators that define individual elements of the spatial order. The list of indicators was compiled based on the literature review and on discussions with experts about spatial planning, landscape shaping, urbanism, spatial economy, and socioeconomic geography. At this point, our own experiences and reflections as well as our familiarity with the research area were also very helpful. For many years, we have conducted research on various aspects of local and regional developments in Świętokrzyskie province, including the growth of the settlement network and rural areas [36,51,55]. We also cooperate with local self-governments and NGOs, designing developmental strategy for rural areas and tourism in this region.

The spatial order perspective was chosen because it allows for a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators and also creates the possibility to evaluate public space from different points of view.

The attractiveness of town squares is understood as a set of urban planning–architectural, functional, social, aesthetic, and ecological features, enabling the largest possible group of users to use the public space. The principal method of evaluation was point bonitation, where a certain number of points is ascribed to individual features determining the attractiveness of the public space. Next, the points allocated to individual elements were summed up. The advantage of this procedure is that a synthetic result is obtained, which makes it possible to compare the scores obtained for the main squares in the studied towns. Moreover, this method enables the researchers to assess the features of different titles [56–58] and to run a reassessment based on new criteria, expressed by means of a different bonitation scale [56,59]. However, what often raises doubts is the choice of features and value scales adopted for them, depending on the experts' knowledge, experience, and opinions [56,59]. The point bonitation method has been used in scientific research for the evaluation of tourist attractiveness of spatial units [60,61], natural resources [58,59,62], geodiversity [56], soil quality and varieties [57,63,64], as well as spatial valorisation of land cover and objects of nature protection [65]. It is also referred

to as [56] rating score [57], bonitation score [63], scoring system [66], or weighting [67,68]. The authors are aware that this method is, to a certain degree, subjective, but this is not uncommon among qualitative methods used in scientific research [61,69–72].

Next, the town square attractiveness index was calculated according to the following formula:

$$WA = \frac{\text{The number of allocated points}}{\text{Maximal number of points}}$$

The attractiveness index ranged from 0 to 1, where 0 signifies the lowest attractiveness (it lacks attractiveness; 0 points within the framework of this research procedure) and where 1 is the highest attractiveness (maximum score). Using its value as a criterion, the authors distinguished town squares of high, medium, and low attractiveness in the following way:

1.  $AI \geq 0.6$ —high attractiveness;
2.  $0.4 \leq AI < 0.6$ —medium attractiveness;
3.  $AI < 0.4$ —low attractiveness.

The attractiveness index made it possible to reduce the number of points allocated to the town squares studied for individual types of spatial order to 0–1 as well as to indicate to what extent the spatial order of public spaces in a given town meets the maximum threshold conditions proposed in this study. A similar technique has been used in scientific research before, bringing positive results [73,74].

It was assumed that spatial order is the structures within the area that form a harmonious whole and takes into account, in orderly relationships, all the architectural–urban planning, functional, social, aesthetic, and ecological conditions and requirements [16,34,75].

It has previously been stated that spatial order consists of five elements.

### 3.1. The Architectural–Urban Planning Order

The architectural–urban planning order is defined by the degree of spatial structural compactness (including residential areas), the cleanliness, the way the buildings are distributed, and their shape and size [76]. Another important aspect is the technical state and the condition of the existing housing tissue, the adopted building convention, the structure and proportions of the buildings, their location in relation to the street, and the colour of the elevations [77–79].

The architectural–urban planning order of the town squares was analysed based on the following elements: the shape and size of the square, the compactness of the buildings surrounding the square, the type of buildings, maintenance of the building alignment, the condition and colour of elevations, the number of overground storeys, and the occurrence of small architectural elements.

In small towns, the main square is densely built up [80]. Therefore, it should have an adequate shape and size. To be design friendly and easily accessible, the town square should have a regular—square or rectangular—shape. According to Gehl [11], its size should ensure the possibility of fulfilling various, often contradictory, needs (e.g., for intimacy and contact with other people, or for peace and quiet as well as fun, at the same time). In order to evaluate the chosen town squares, they were divided into those being regular and irregular in shapes as well as into large, medium-sized, and small squares. Large squares of a regular shape were allocated more points. Under some circumstances, an irregular shape was compensated for by the size of the square. The scores are presented in Table 2.

The next feature assessed was the compactness of residential buildings. A building facing the town square from the front is considered prestigious. Therefore, plots of land in this part of the town are usually among the most expensive. A feature of a well-developed space around the town square is the high density of buildings and a lack of unoccupied plots, which not only has an impact on the visual effect but also creates an opportunity to diversify economic activity. The lack of vacant plots of land is particularly important in

small towns, as such plots are usually unesthetic and spoil the view of the whole square. We distinguished residential buildings of high, medium, and low compactness (Table 3).

**Table 2.** Town square shapes and sizes—evaluation criteria.

Town Square Shape	Square Size (Area, Including Streets and Pavements)	Number of Points
Regular (square and rectangular)	Large (over 10,000 m <sup>2</sup> )	3
	Medium (5100–1000 m <sup>2</sup> )	2
	Small (up to 5000 m <sup>2</sup> )	1
Irregular	Large (over 10,000 m <sup>2</sup> )	2
	Medium (5100–10,000 m <sup>2</sup> )	1
	Small (up to 5000 m <sup>2</sup> )	0

Source: authors' own elaboration.

**Table 3.** Architectural–urban planning order—evaluation criteria.

Feature	Compactness	Criterion (% of Empty Plots in Relations to the Number of Buildings along the Town Square Frontage)	Number of Points
Building compactness	High	No vacant plots	2
	Medium	0–20% of vacant plots	1
	Low	Over 20% of vacant plots	0

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The next feature taken into account when evaluating the architectural–urban planning order was the type of buildings. The buildings were divided into detached, single-family houses; semi-detached or terraced houses; multi-family houses; and other buildings (e.g., temporary constructions) [78].

Single-family detached houses were rated the best. However, as town squares are space with special, compact structures of buildings, terraced or semi-detached houses should be regarded highly. For this study, we focused on the degree of uniformity between the residential buildings. At the same time, it is worth paying attention to so-called temporary constructions (pavilions, kiosks, and caravans adapted to trading activity). They usually do not look attractive, do not match other buildings, and negatively affect the view of the whole town square. We distinguished between uniform buildings, non-uniform buildings with a small share of temporary constructions, and non-uniform buildings with a large share of temporary constructions (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Type of buildings—evaluation criteria.

Feature	Criterion	Number of Points
Uniform buildings	Over 60% of buildings of the same type (single-family detached, single-family terraced or semi-detached, or multi-family) in the total number of buildings; less than 5% of temporary constructions	3
Non-uniform buildings with a small share of temporary constructions	No predominant type of buildings; less than 10% of temporary construction in the total number of buildings	2
Non-uniform buildings with a large share of temporary constructions	No predominant type of buildings; more than 10% of temporary construction in the total number of buildings	0

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Another important feature is the maintenance of building alignment. An imaginary line demarcates the distance between the building and the frontage border. Local spatial development plans usually impose a binding and impassable building alignment [78].



In this study, we refer to the line demarcated by adjacent buildings. Maintaining this alignment has an influence on the aesthetic value of the town square and organises the surroundings (pavements, driveways, etc.) (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Building alignment and structure—evaluation criteria.

Feature	Criteria	Number of Points
Maintaining building alignment	Maintained building alignment (100% of buildings stand along one line)	2
	A curbed line of buildings (two curbs in the whole line of buildings are accepted)	1
	The alignment of buildings is not maintained (more than two curbs in the whole line of buildings around the square)	0

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The next significant feature of the architectural–urban planning order assessed was the condition and colour of buildings' elevations. The state of the building is often related to its age. The front colour, however, is a controversial problem. Although it is generally assumed that flashy colours on buildings are distasteful and disturb the architectural–urban planning order, in recent years, the idea of *pastelosis* has grown. It was introduced by F. Springer [81], describing negative phenomena in the space of Polish towns and cities. *Pastelosis* is an effect of the thermal modernisation of Polish houses with the use of Styrofoam, which is later painted with pastel colours. We distinguished four categories of buildings based on their condition and colour (cf. [78]) (Table 6).

**Table 6.** The condition and colour of buildings' elevations—evaluation criteria.

Feature	Criterion	Number of Points
Well-kept and subdued buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Over 90% of buildings were described as well-kept and subdued;</li> <li>Up to 10% of buildings were described as neglected and subdued; and</li> <li>No buildings were described as flashy, neglected, and non-uniform.</li> </ul>	3
Relatively well-kept and subdued buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At least 75% of buildings were described as well-kept and subdued;</li> <li>Up to 25% of buildings were described as neglected and subdued as well as flashy, neglected, and non-uniform.</li> </ul>	2
Neglected and subdued buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less than 75% of buildings were described as well-kept and subdued;</li> <li>At least 25% of buildings were described as neglected and subdued as well as flashy, neglected, and non-uniform, with most described as neglected and subdued.</li> </ul>	1
Very neglected, brightly coloured, non-uniform buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less than 75% of buildings were described as subdued and well kept; and</li> <li>At least 25% of buildings were described as neglected and subdued as well as flashy, neglected, and non-uniform, with most described as flashy, neglected, and non-uniform.</li> </ul>	0

Source: authors' own elaboration.

It is also important to consider uniformity with regard to the height of the buildings standing along the town square frontage, measuring it using the number of storeys. Multi-storey buildings around the town square make it possible to diversify functions, which is beneficial both to the owners of the buildings and to the residents. However, from an

architectural–urban planning order perspective, it is important to achieve uniformity with regard to the height of the buildings. The scores allocated for this feature are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7.** The diversity in the height of the buildings—evaluation criteria.

Feature	Criterion	Number of Points
Significant number of two- and three-storey buildings (including a usable attic)	Over 75% of buildings have two or more storeys	2
Many two- and three-storey buildings (including a usable attic)	51–74% of buildings have two or more storeys	1
Mostly one-storey buildings	Over 50% of buildings have one storey	0

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The last evaluated feature in this order was the number of small architectural elements placed in the town square. These included religious elements (chapels and saints' figures), statues, and utility elements for everyday recreation (sandpits and swings) and for sanitation (litter bins) (Table 8). (According to the Construction Act from 1994 [82], small architectural elements are a set of small construction objects serving area-development purposes. Basic types of small architectural elements include (1) religious cult objects (e.g., chapels, roadside crosses and figures), (2) garden objects (e.g., statues and fountains), and (3) utility objects, for daily recreation (e.g., sandpits, swings, and benches) and for sanitation (e.g., litter bins).) Other small architectural elements are discussed when evaluating the spatial order. The criteria for allocating points were established based on the distribution of features in the towns in question.

**Table 8.** The occurrence of small architectural elements—evaluation criteria.

Feature	Criteria	Number of Points
A large number of small architectural elements	6 or more elements per 1000 m <sup>2</sup> of the area of the town square	3
An average number of small architectural elements	4–5 elements per 1000 m <sup>2</sup> of the area of the town square	2
An insignificant number of small architectural elements	3 elements or fewer per 1000 m <sup>2</sup> of the area of the town square	0

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The total number of points allocated for the architectural–urban planning order ranged from 0 to 18.

### 3.2. The Functional Order

The second category of the spatial order is the functional order, referring to the comfort of living, and the co-occurrence of various functions and relations among them, such as the occurrence of service, education, and recreation facilities. A properly designed town square should ensure that regular everyday activities (e.g., going to work, to the shop, and to the bus stop), optional activities (e.g., going for a walk and using small architectural elements), and social activities (e.g., having meetings, conversing, and carrying out all kinds of activities) can be performed [11].

In order to evaluate the functional order of town squares in the towns studied, we used the following measures: the number of service outlets per 100 m of frontage length, the percentage of storeys with higher-order services out of the total number of storeys, the percentage of vacancies out of the total number of storeys, and the ratio of apartments on the ground floor to the total number of buildings. The higher-order services included financial (banking and insurance), legal, advertising, IT, realty, and health care services (doctor and dentist) (cf. [26]). The evaluation criteria were established based on the distribution of individual features in the towns in question (Table 9). The exception was the number of service outlets per 100 m of frontage length. In this case, the authors used the criteria proposed by Gehl [11].

**Table 9.** Evaluation criteria for the functional order.

Measure	Town Square Categories	Evaluation Criteria	Number of Points
No. of service establishments per 100 m of frontage length [26]	Attractive	15–20 service points per 100 m	4
	Pleasant	10–14 service points per 100 m	3
	“Somewhere in between”	6–9 service points per 100 m	2
	Boring	2–5 service points per 100 m	1
	Unattractive	1 service point per 100 m of the frontage or no services	0
Percentage of service points in the number of storeys	High	Over 60%	2
	Medium	30–60%	1
	Low	Under 30%	0
Percentage of places offering higher-order services in the number of storeys	High	Over 10%	2
	Medium	5–10%	1
	Low	Under 5%	0
Percentage of vacancies in the number of storeys	High	Over 10%	0
	Medium	5–10%	1
	Low	Under 5%	2
The ratio of ground floor apartments to the total number of buildings	High	Over 33%	0
	Medium	10–33%	1
	Low	Under 10%	2
Total number of points			0–12

Source: authors’ own elaboration.

### 3.3. The Social Order

The third element of the spatial order is the social order, which refers to individual and collective identification with places and spaces as well as social bonds [83]. It is important that public spaces be accessible without restrictions, ensure safety for their users, and provide all kinds of facilities needed to spend time there and to develop social contacts. The measures and criteria for social order evaluation are presented in Table 10.

### 3.4. The Aesthetic Order

Another element of the spatial order is the aesthetic order. It is the most subjective category, as it refers to the beauty of the town square space. According to Encyklopedia PWN [84], to be aesthetically pleasing means to have a pleasant, stylish look, a sense of beauty. It is difficult to state clearly what “beautiful” means. U. Eco [85] claimed that a beautiful thing is something that makes us happy if it is ours but remains beautiful even if it belongs to someone else. Bierwiazzonek [86] notes that it is commonly assumed that beauty is not what is beautiful but what is attractive to individuals. He adds that what people like usually follows the spirit of contemporary times and the ideal of beauty developed in a given epoch. It can be generally assumed that every culture has its own set of composition rules, shared by a given community [87]. It is often stated in the literature that the aesthetic order depends on the richness of information, cleanliness, and colourfulness, as well as symbols facilitating orientation and skilful navigation [88]. Therefore, in order to evaluate the aesthetic order, we adopted measures defining the level of cleanliness, the aesthetics of advertisements, and the general aesthetic impression of the town square. They were evaluated independently using a seven-degree Likert scale, where 1 signified total neglect, the highest unattractiveness (ugliness) of advertisements, and the highest unattractiveness (ugliness) of the town square space, and 7 meant cleanliness, aesthetic advertisements, and a very attractive square space. We visited the squares studied twice: in the late autumn (end of October 2020) and in the summer (July 2021). The evaluation was based on the mean ratings by two authors on both trips (Table 11).

Table 10. Measures and criteria for social order evaluation.

Feature	Measure	Type	Criteria	Number of Points
Accessibility/ Availability	Number of streets leading to the town square	High	6 or more	2
		Average	4–5	1
		Low	2–3	0
	Amenities for people with disabilities (parking spaces and ramps)	Spaces with amenities	At least one amenity	1
		Spaces without amenities	No amenities	0
	Number of parking spaces for bicycles per 1000 m <sup>2</sup> of the town square	High availability	More than 2	2
		Average availability	1–2	1
		Poor availability	Less than 1	0
	Number of streetlamps per 1000 m <sup>2</sup> of the whole square (the town square together with streets and pavements)	Good lighting	More than 5	2
		Medium-quality lighting	3–5	1
		Poor lighting	Less than 3	0
Safety	Number of parking spaces (for cars) per 1000 m <sup>2</sup> of the whole square (the town square together with streets and pavements)	High availability	More than 7	0
		Average availability	5–7	1
		Poor availability	Less than 5	2
	Public and private monitoring	Space with public or/and private monitoring	At least 1 camera directed towards the square	1
		Space without public or/and private monitoring	No cameras	0
	Police station	Space with a police station	Police station directly at the town square frontage or at the streets leading to it	1
		Space without a police station	No police station directly at the town square frontage or at the streets leading to it	0
	Number of pedestrian crossings per 100 m around the square	Large	More than 1.5	2
		Average	1.0–1.5	1
		Small	Less than 1	0
	Technical condition of pavements	Pavements in good technical condition	Over half of the pavement length in a good condition	1
		Pavements in poor technical condition	Over half of the pavement length in a poor condition	0
	Limited traffic	Traffic-free zone	Complete lack of traffic	2
		A zone with limited traffic	Maximum car speed-50 km/h and/or no lorries allowed	1
		Unrestricted traffic zone	No restrictions for traffic	0

Table 10. Cont.

Feature	Measure	Type	Criteria	Number of Points
Facilities making public space usable	Number of benches per 100 m <sup>2</sup> of the town square	Large availability	More than 1	2
		Average availability	0.5–1.0	1
		Poor availability	Less than 0.5	0
	Number of benches in shaded areas per 100 m <sup>2</sup> of the town square	Large availability	More than 1	2
		Average availability	0.5–1.0	1
		Poor availability	Less than 0.5	0
	Number of tables per 100 m <sup>2</sup> of the town square	Large availability	More than 5	2
		Average availability	1–5	1
		Poor availability	No tables	0
	Gaming facilities (e.g., chess boards)	Spaces with gaming facilities	At least 1 facility	1
		Spaces without gaming facilities	No facilities	0
	Cash dispensers	Spaces with cash dispensers	At least 1 cash dispenser	1
		Spaces without cash dispensers	No cash dispensers	0
Total	Public toilets	Spaces with toilets	At least 1 toilet	1
		Spaces without toilets	No toilets	0
	Outdoor restaurants	Spaces with outdoor restaurants	At least 1 outdoor restaurant	1
		Spaces without outdoor restaurants	No outdoor restaurants	0
	Number of walking alleys	Large	11 or more walking alleys	2
		Average	6–10 walking alleys	1
		Small	Less than 6 walking alleys	0
	Bike paths	Spaces with bike paths	At least 1 bike path	1
		Spaces without bike paths	No bike paths	0
	Total			0–28

Source: authors' own elaboration.



**Table 11.** Evaluation criteria for elements of the aesthetic order.

Feature	Type of Town Square	Criteria	Number of Points
Spatial cleanliness	Very clean	Mean rating on the Likert scale 7	4
	Clean	Mean rating on the Likert scale 6	3
	Medium clean	Mean rating on the Likert scale 4–5	2
	Dirty	Mean rating on the Likert scale 2–3	1
	Very dirty	Mean rating on the Likert scale 1	0
Attractiveness of advertisements	High	Mean rating on the Likert scale 6–7	2
	Average	Mean rating on the Likert scale 3–4–5	1
	Poor	Mean rating on the Likert scale 1–2	0
General aesthetic impression	Very nice	Mean rating on the Likert scale 7	4
	Nice	Mean rating on the Likert scale 6	3
	Average	Mean rating on the Likert scale 4–5	2
	Ugly	Mean rating on the Likert scale 2–3	1
	Very ugly	Mean rating on the Likert scale 1	0
Total			0–10

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The assessment of elements of the aesthetic order was difficult because it was based on subjective feelings. As one English proverb says, beauty (ugliness) lies in the eye of the beholder. However, in order to be more objective, we adopted the principle that an advertisement is attractive (pretty) if it is not damaged, is legible, and is subdued in colour. An unsightly (unattractive) advertisement is one that is illegible, made unprofessionally (by hand), flashy, and disproportionate in terms of size to the content it presents. If unsightly (unattractive) ads accounted for more than 70% of their total number, the advertising layer was assumed to be unattractive and 1–2 points were awarded on the Likert scale. In the case when ugly ads accounted for 30–70% of their total number, the authors allocated 3–5 points, whereas the share of ugly ads in the total number, being less than 30%, was rated the highest, at 6–7 points. In addition, we investigated the number of advertisements (information chaos), their arrangement, and the uniformity in design (cf. [89]). Similar assumptions were made when assessing the overall aesthetic impression that a square made. In the absence of harmony between individual elements of spatial order, visible neglect of the square (broken benches, littered alleys, rusty parts of fountains, lack of greenery, flowers, etc.) was assessed as very ugly, with 1 point awarded on the Likert scale. Along with the authors' growing positive aesthetic impression, the number of points also increased. This stage of research was the most difficult. When can you say that something is ugly (beautiful)? You know it when you see it (the phrase "I know it when I see it" was used in 1964 by United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart [89]) Beauty is a value that entails harmony, moderation, and balance. It requires abundance but not overload, and simplicity but not meagreness or monotony [90].

### 3.5. The Green Order

The last element of the spatial order in the town squares studied was the green order, referring to valuing the natural environment [83,91]. In order to evaluate the green order of the town squares in small towns, we adopted measures related to the size and type of green areas (trees, bushes, and flower beds) and the presence of small architectural elements, such as fountains and small ponds (Table 12). The criteria for allocating points were based on the distribution of individual features in the studied towns.

**Table 12.** Criteria in the evaluation of green-order elements.

Feature	Measure	Types	Distinguishing Criteria	Number of Points
Tree density	Number of trees per 100 m <sup>2</sup> of the town square	High	3 or more	2
		Average	2	1
		Low	1 or no trees	0
Shrub density	Number of shrubs per 100 m <sup>2</sup> of the town square	High	2 or more	2
		Average	1–1.9	1
		Low	Less than 1 or none	0
Number of flowers in the town square	Number of flower beds and pots with flowers per 100 m <sup>2</sup> of the town square	High	3 or more	2
		Average	1–2.9	1
		Low	Less than 1 or none	0
Around-the-house greenery	Percentage of houses with flowered lawns or flowers in front of the house in the total number of residential buildings	High	Over 50% of houses had a representational flower bed or flowerpots	2
		Average	30–50% of houses had a representational flower bed or flowerpots	1
		Low	Less than 30% of houses had a representational flower bed or flowerpots	0
Water elements (small ponds and fountains)	Presence of a fountain or small pond	Squares with water elements	At least 1 working fountain or a small pond	1
		Squares without water elements	No water elements	0
	Technical condition and purity of water	High	Mean rating on the Likert scale 6–7	2
		Average	Mean rating on the Likert scale 3–5	1
		Poor	Mean rating on the Likert scale 1–2	0
Total				0–11

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The total of these five elements of public spaces was the basis for the evaluation of their attractiveness in small towns. However, we stress that making a clear classification of all five categories of order is difficult [72]. Some of the measures mentioned above may describe the functional and social, architectural–urban planning, aesthetic, green, social, and functional orders at the same time.

We assumed that all of the features described above are equally important for the spatial order of public space, so we did not diversify them with the use of ranks. This mainly resulted from the fact that public spaces in the studied towns are generally under-developed, and some features do not occur at all (e.g., functional elements such as bike paths); diversifying the features by means of ranks was not justified from the point of view of the research process. It should also be noted that the predominant assumption found in the literature on the subject is that all of the components of spatial order are equally important for the functioning of a public space. Without well-developed elements of the urban planning–architectural or social orders, the main squares in small towns would not perform the basic functions of a public space, similar to the ecological and aesthetic orders [33,34,92].

The third stage in the research was a field study, which involved making a detailed catalogue of town squares in the studied towns. The researchers prepared an inventory

card for each building, including the measures described above (Table 13). They prepared a total of 286 cards of buildings standing along the town square frontage.

**Table 13.** An inventory card of a building situated along the town square frontage.

Name of town	
Name of street	
Building number	
No. of overground storeys	
Type of building	Single-family, detached Single-family, semi-detached, or terraced Other (office, temporary, etc.)
Location of the building in relation to the street	Parallel to the street Perpendicular to the street Other
Location of the building in relation to the main building line	Maintaining the main building line Building pushed back from the main building line Building pushed forward from the main building line
Functions	Ground floor 1st floor 2nd floor Other
Condition and colour of elevations	Well-kept, subdued Neglected and subdued Flashy, neglected and non-uniform
Age of the building	Before World War II After World War II, from the 1990s New, modern
Type of foundations	Stone, unplastered Stone, plastered Other besides stone
Greenery near the house	Representational lawn with flowers in front of the house Single plants No greenery near the house

Source: elaboration based on [70].

Additionally, all town squares were inventoried, with particular consideration of the small architectural elements, green areas, intensity and aesthetics of advertisements, etc. Nine such cards were prepared (Table 14).

As the next step, the authors evaluated the attractiveness of the squares according to the adopted criteria and formula and, based on this, drew conclusions.

Apart from the point bonitation method and field study, the researchers used the graphic method, which enabled them to present the shapes and sizes of the town squares as well as their functional diversification.

**Table 14.** An inventory card of the town square.

Name of Town	
General Information	
Shape of town square	Regular—rectangular Regular—square Irregular Regular—other
Town square size (town hall or/and geoportal info)	Town square surface The whole town square area Length of northside frontage Length of southside frontage Length of eastside frontage Length of westside frontage
Functional Order	
Small architecture elements, including religious objects	Chapels (number) Figures and statues (number) Other (number)
Utility objects used for everyday recreation	Climbing frames Swings (number) Other (what kind?)
Utility objects for sanitation General aesthetic impression	Rubbish bins (number) Scale 1 (aesthetic)–7 (highly unaesthetic)
Social Order	
Accessibility	No. of streets leading to the town square Amenities for disabled people (parking spaces, ramps, etc.) No. of parking spaces for bicycles No. of streetlamps No. of parking spaces for cars
Safety	No. of lamps General monitoring Monitoring on private property Police station in the town square or the streets leading to it Even and well-kept pavements Uneven and neglected pavements Quality of pavements No. of pedestrian crossings Traffic restrictions (no car traffic, speed limit, etc.)
Facilities making it possible to use public spaces	Stage and sound system Total number of benches Number of benches in shaded places Number of tables Other facilities (e.g., chess boards) Outdoor restaurants
Identity-related places	Slabs/boulders with plaques commemorating important events Models, photography exhibitions related to the history of the town Other
Facilities encouraging long stays in public space	Working public toilets No. of outdoor restaurants Cash dispensers No. of walking alleys Bike paths

Table 14. Cont.

Name of Town	
Aesthetic Order	
Cleanliness in the town square	Scale: 1 (dirty)–7 (very clean)
Graphics	No. of advertisements No. of information boards
General aesthetic impression	Aesthetics of adverts: scale: 1 (unaesthetic)–7 (aesthetic) Scale: 1 (unaesthetic)–7 (aesthetic)
Green Order	
Vegetation	No. of trees No. of shrubs Number of flower beds and lawns
Presence of water elements	Small pond Fountain
Technical condition of water elements and purity of water	Working Idle Cleanliness scale: 1 dirty–7 very clean Purity of water (0–7)

Source: authors' own elaboration.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The overall score for all elements of the spatial order ranged from 26 to 46 points (Table 15), which means that the studied public spaces received 33–58% of the maximum number of points possible.

Table 15. Points for elements of the spatial order and the town square attractiveness index.

Town	Number of Points for Each Order						Attractiveness Index
	Architectural–Urban Planning	Functional	Social	Aesthetic	Green	Total	
Daleszyce	11	8	15	8	4	46	0.58
Koprzywnica	8	7	9	3	0	27	0.34
Łagów	9	7	16	6	7	45	0.56
Nowa Słupia	7	9	7	3	0	26	0.33
Nowy Korczyn	9	4	18	5	4	40	0.50
Opatowiec	11	3	8	4	3	29	0.36
Radoszyce	11	7	14	6	5	43	0.54
Stopnica	12	7	14	7	4	44	0.55
Wiślica	11	6	14	5	6	42	0.53

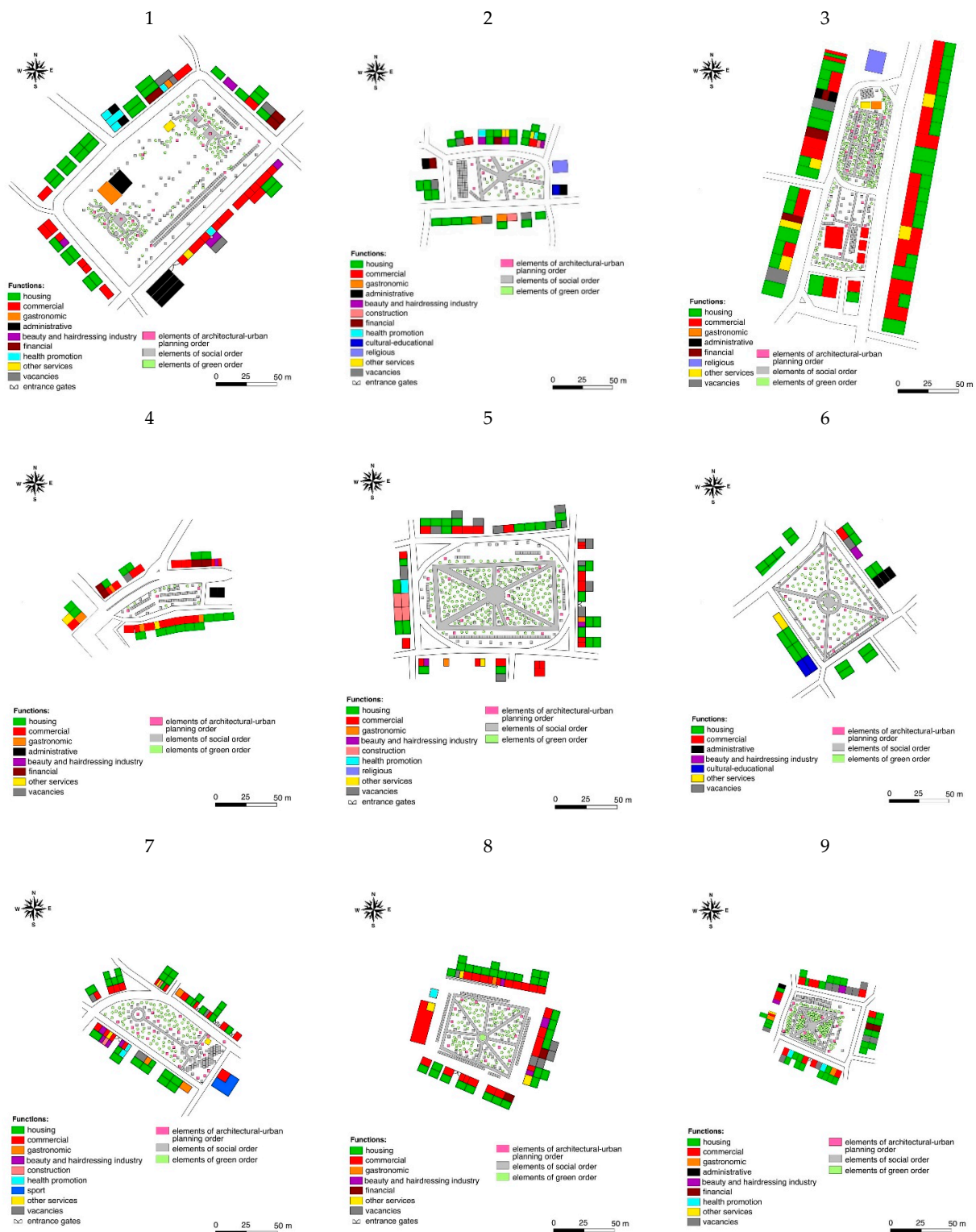
Source: authors' own elaboration.

##### 4.1. The Architectural–Urban Planning Order

The score for all elements of the architectural–urban planning order ranged from 7 to 12 points. The maximum number of points was 18 (Table 15), which means low and medium levels of this order were found for the analysed towns. The highest number of points was allocated to the town square in Stopnica (Figure 2), a destination that regained its municipal rights only six years ago. The town square there has a regular shape, close to a square, and its area (together with streets and pavements) covers over 7000 m<sup>2</sup>, which places it among medium-sized town squares. The square in Stopnica was allocated 12 out of 18 points (67% of the maximum score). The smallest number of points was allocated to the town square in Nowa Słupia, which has an irregular shape and a small area, slightly over 6000 m<sup>2</sup>. It regained its municipal rights in 2019. Generally speaking, the town square in this town was neglected with respect to the architectural–urban planning order. The only highly rated feature was the type of buildings. They were mostly uniform buildings,



with few temporary structures. The remaining features were rated poorly, particularly the compactness of the buildings, the condition and colour of the elevations, and the occurrence of small architectural elements. The researchers allocated seven points to this square (39% of the maximum square).



**Figure 2.** Selected elements of the spatial order of town squares in new small towns. Source: authors' own elaboration. 1—Daleszyce, 2—Koprzywnica, 3—Łagów, 4—Nowa Słupia, 5—Nowy Korczyn, 6—Opatowiec, 7—Radoszyce, 8—Stopnica, 9—Wiślica.

Generally speaking, town squares in the studied towns are regular in shape; the majority of them are small and medium-sized. Only two towns—Daleszyce and Łagów—have rectangular squares of impressive sizes. Both towns were granted subsidies for revitalisation, transforming these spaces according to current trends. The areas of the squares exceed 20,000 m<sup>2</sup>.

The weaknesses of all of the town squares were the low compactness of the buildings and large number of undeveloped plots. These weaknesses are convergent with the results of studies conducted by other authors, stressing the insufficient use of space near central squares in small towns [26]. The compactness of the buildings is additionally reduced by drive-in gates, which often disrupt the whole space. Another drawback is the poor state and faded or motley colours of building facades. In nearly all cases, many buildings were neglected and brightly painted, not matching the surroundings. Regrettably, this phenomenon is often stressed in the literature and can be found in the public spaces of towns of different sizes [16]. The amount of small architectural elements was also rated poorly (Figure 2). Only in individual cases could we find figures or statues in the square (in Stopnica, 2; in Daleszyce, 2; and in Wiślica, Nowy Korczyn, Łagów, and Opatowiec, 1). Most pieces of small architecture were for sanitation (litter bins), but they were scarce in the public spaces studied, which has been confirmed by the observations made by other researchers regarding the development of public space in small Polish towns [8,37,39,93,94]. The number of small architectural elements found in town squares is connected to the historical past. They are represented by statues of historical figures and figures of saints, showing people's attitude regarding the Catholic Church and Christian faith. In the towns in question, even historical events are presented in conjunction with characters related to Catholic Church. Czepczyński [8] called this a sacralisation of public spaces and claimed that it is the most pronounced and dynamic socio-spatial process observed in many small towns. They also indicated that many elements of this type are historical and related to the activity of previous generations. Small architectural elements also point to the modern use of financial resources, which are spent to cover the cost of revitalisation (e.g., introducing elements used to maintain cleanliness).

The low evaluation of the architectural–urban planning order is closely connected to the age of the buildings. Many were built before World War II, and the majority were erected in the socialist period (1945–1989), with only a few appearing at the turn of the 21st century. During central planning, the appearances of buildings were not a priority and there were shortages of basic construction materials or finishing elements (external fittings, window and door woodwork, glazing, balustrades, cladding, plasters, and paint coatings) [95]. It is mainly such houses that surround the main public spaces in these towns. The loss of their municipal rights deepened the economic crisis, and in no way did it help to recreate the housing tissue. The age of buildings is also related to the number of storeys. Those built before World War II usually have one storey, e.g., temporary and provisional constructions (pavilions and kiosks). The buildings erected during the centrally planned economy period usually have two storeys, and new buildings have two storeys and a usable attic. Similar features were observed in small towns located in other regions of Poland [17]. The state of the buildings surrounding the squares also worsened due to migration processes. Young people are migrating to larger centres, and those who stay are older and cannot afford to redecorate their houses. It is generally an unfavourable situation because, as Jacobs [3] (p. 29) said, “If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull.”

#### 4.2. Functional Order

The score for the functional order ranged from three to nine points (Table 15). The maximum number of points to be calculated was 12, which means that the studied public spaces received 25–75% of the maximum number of points. Thus, it can be stated that the functional order in the studied towns was at the low and medium level (Table 15, Figure 2). The highest number of points (9) was allocated to the town square in Nowa Słupia, a

destination situated on the edge of Świętokrzyski National Park, which concentrates most tourist traffic to the Holy Rood Monastery, an important place in the province and in Poland from historical and religious points of view. From the 13th to the early 19th century, the town was the property of the Holy Rood Benedictine Abbey. For centuries, it developed infrastructure providing services to tourists, which caused a relatively high functional diversification and enabled a large number of establishments to adapt to service functions. The smallest number of points was allocated to Opatowiec (three points)—the least populated town in the country. The buildings standing along the town square frontage did not develop any other function except for the residential one.

The weakness of the functional order of the squares in the studied towns was the generally small functional diversification. The predominant function was trade (5–50% of the overall number of storeys). The shops were usually small groceries or markets, where one can buy all kinds of goods, from toiletries and household chemicals to metal objects and household equipment. It was more typical of rural areas than towns, even small ones. Higher-order services (financial, healthcare, cultural–educational, legal, and advertising) were rare, and they did not occupy more than 11% of the total number of storeys (in most towns, it was 2–5%). A similar phenomenon has been identified by other researchers in various regions of Poland. This is typical of small Polish towns [26]. What is also worrying is the high percentage of vacancies in the buildings surrounding the town square. For instance, in Nowy Korczyn, every fourth storey showed no signs of being used, and in Wiślica, nearly every fifth one. Apart from the fact that they do not have a utility value, vacancies also have neglected elevations and woodwork and, generally, make a bad impression.

The lack of functional diversification makes public spaces boring and not attractive to the inhabitants. Holland et al. [96] found that people are attracted and usually stay longer in public spaces that offer excitement, stimulation, and some comfort. A particularly negative factor affecting the functioning of the town squares in the studied towns is the lack of gastronomic establishments. As indicated by Whyte [97], nothing attracts people to a public space as effectively as the possibility to eat and drink, and a person having a meal in a public space attracts even more people. The town square as a central place should be a concentration of a variety of services. The towns in question have not developed a rich functional structure, remaining rural units. The shrinking population does not encourage the town to expand their service offer.

#### 4.3. Social Order

The score for the social order in the towns analysed ranged from 7 to 18 points. The maximum number of points was 28 (Table 15), which means that the studied public spaces received 25–64% of the maximum number of points. Thus, the social order in the towns studied was also at the low and medium levels. The highest number of points was allocated to the town square in Nowy Korczyn (Figure 2). The town regained its municipal rights in 2019. The whole square has a small area, but many elements, as well as their accessibility and safety for various social groups, have been taken care of. However, it must be stressed that, although many elements function within the space of the square, their availability is definitely insufficient. If we take amenities for people with disabilities, for example, there are parking spaces in the square but only two. According to the regulations [98], there should be a minimum of three such spaces. (The number of parking spaces for people with disabilities in Poland is specified by the Public Roads Act of 21 March 1985 [98]. This number depends on the total number of parking spaces in a given carpark. When a lot has six to 15 parking spaces, one should be reserved for people with disabilities. However, in carparks with 16–40 spaces, a minimum of two spaces must be designated for people with disabilities. In carparks where the total number of parking spaces is 41–100, a minimum of three parking spaces should be dedicated to this group of people. If there are more than 100 parking spaces, 4% of them must be reserved for people with disabilities. There are 70 parking spaces at the square in Nowy Korczyn.) The lowest

number of points was allocated to the squares in Nowa Słupia (7) and Opatowiec (8). None of them follow the basic rules of social order, and they do not encourage developing interpersonal relationships. In Nowa Słupia, almost the whole space of the square is used as a parking lot. Similar management approaches have been defined as inappropriate and were also observed in other regions of Poland [17,33,37,39]. Research shows that areas dedicated to car traffic decrease the vitality of public spaces [99]. There are no walking alleys, trees, shrubs, or small architectural elements. A similar situation was observed in Opatowiec. There is inadequate lighting on the square and an insufficient number of pedestrian crossings. There are also no public toilets, ATMs, restaurant gardens, or other elements attracting the inhabitants of the town.

Generally, another weakness of all of the town squares under study was a lack of facilities and elements that would not only attract the inhabitants but also make them stay longer. People tend to stay within public space if they find comfortable seats there, with some kind of protection against bad weather [2]. The small number or complete lack of gastronomic establishments, lack of public toilets or limited access to them, and lack of outdoor restaurants do not enhance the vitality of public spaces. During revitalisation, trees and shrubs were nearly completely removed from the two largest town squares in Łagów and Daleszyce. Despite later attempts, it was impossible to restore the former greenery. As a result, the number of benches in shaded places decreased, which is particularly important, as the majority of the towns' inhabitants are senior citizens.

#### 4.4. Aesthetic Order

The score for the aesthetic order in the towns analysed ranged from three to eight points. The maximum number of points was 10 (Table 15), which means that the studied public spaces received 30–80% of the maximum number of points. The highest number of points was allocated to Daleszyce, which is a destination situated closest to the main city of the province, Kielce, and was the first to regain its municipal rights among the towns in the study (2007). This is important because the town could take advantage of Polish and European funds for revitalisation. From an aesthetic point of view, the town looks very impressive, it is very clean, and the problem of unattractive advertisements is under control.

The lowest rated for aesthetics were the town squares in Koprzywnica and Nowa Słupia. These squares are characterised by an excessive number of advertisements and signboards. They are poorly made, often heavily weathered, and cause information chaos. In Koprzywnica, there are over 10 adverts and signboards per 100 m of square frontage length. The cobbled town square in Nowa Słupia, which has no flowers or greenery, is filled with cars and has practically no strolling or relaxing people in view, and does not have a high degree of spatial order according to this study. Previous research has shown that spaces designed for traffic decrease the vitality of public spaces [6,100]. In addition, as stressed by Jacobs [3] and by Jalaladini and Oktay [2], the decreasing significance of pedestrian traffic in urban public spaces makes them dehumanised and lowers the quality of life for the inhabitants.

#### 4.5. Green Order

The score for the green order in the towns analysed ranged from zero to seven points. The maximum number of points was 11 (Table 15), which means that the studied public spaces received 0–64% of the maximum number of points. The largest number of points was allocated to the town square in Łagów (Figure 2). It is one of the largest squares in the whole province, revitalised in 2013 for nearly half a million PLN (about EUR 120,000). Similar to the majority of revitalised town squares in Poland, in the second decade of the 21st century, nearly all trees and shrubs were cut down and the whole surface of the two square was paved. However, for several years, there have been attempts to restore green surfaces, and in the case of Łagów, it has been partly successful. Unfortunately, the destruction of greenery in public spaces in small Polish cities has virtually become a regular



feature of these spaces. Many authors emphasise this negative aspect of shaping central squares in small towns [37,39]. The town square in Nowa Słupia, which is practically devoid of greenery, was allocated zero points for green order (Figure 2).

In Nowy Korczyn, Nowa Słupia, and Pokrzywnica, a lack of greenery was noted outside residents' homes (90%, 87%, and 77%, respectively). Such numbers must be regarded as highly influential on the overall green order of the towns and, therefore, as a weakness in terms of the overall spatial order.

#### 4.6. Attractiveness of the Town Squares

Taking the attractiveness index values into consideration, the town squares in the towns analysed can be divided into two groups: squares of medium and low attractiveness. The first group includes the squares in Daleszyce, Łagów, Nowy Korczyn, Radoszyce, Stopnica, and Wiślica, where the attractiveness index ranged from 0.50 to 0.58. This means that those squares scored about half of the maximum score. This group contains two categories of squares. The first one includes revitalised squares, with well-designed social and aesthetic orders but imperfect green order (Daleszyce (Figure 3), Łagów (Figure 3), Stopnica (Figure 3), and Wiślica (Figure 3)). Revitalisation included a good design of the town square and small architectural elements, such as some amenities promoting social contacts (tables, gaming equipment, etc.). The other category encompasses squares that have not been revitalised yet, where natural greenery has not been damaged. In these towns, town squares are characterised by city parks. Due to the number of inhabitants and historical conditions, they have high-quality social and architectural-urban planning orders, which eventually raised the value of the attractiveness index by over 0.5. This category includes the town squares in Radoszyce and Nowy Korczyn.

The other group, consisting of unattractive squares (low attractiveness index, less than 0.4), includes the town squares in Opatowiec, Koprzywnica, and Nowa Słupia. These spaces do not have attributes of urban public spaces. None of the elements of social order have been fully developed.

The characteristic features of these squares include small functional diversity, lack or small number of amenities enhancing social contacts (tables, game boards, walking alleys, and benches), insufficient greenery, poor aesthetics of the frontage buildings, and small area of the central public space.

Public spaces in small towns, which used to be villages just a few years ago, do not seem to be attractive. This seems to be the main cause of the low quality of all attempts at renovation of these spaces. The projects often do not consider the history of the town, its identity, or the needs of its inhabitants. They duplicate previously prepared projects for other towns of similar sizes (and similar numbers of inhabitants) [101]. A lack of stable traditions and models of creating central spaces in small towns lowers their attractiveness. The physical forms of these towns loosely refer to the wishes and needs of the local communities [2]. Watson et al. [102] indicated that town squares shaped in this way do not have a clear, specific character and are only a mixture of styles and themes borrowed from different parts of Poland and the world. Perhaps this uniform pattern of urban spaces results from the fact that such a concept turned out to be a success in the struggle for EU funds, and other local government units, wanting to increase their chances in this race, follow these "good models" [39].

It should also be noted that the results obtained depend, to a large extent, on the method and measures adopted. The bonitation method used in the study and the concept of spatial order allowed us, on the one hand, to assess the attractiveness of the squares of small towns in Poland from a broad perspective, using a rich and varied set of measures. This approach should be assessed positively. On the other hand, the study used a number of qualitative measures that require subjective assessment by researchers (e.g., measures describing the aesthetic order of public space). This means that the results may vary depending on the personality traits of the researchers (e.g., aesthetic feelings, emotional state, and weather conditions).





**Figure 3.** Town squares. Source: authors' own work. 1—Daleszyce, 2—Koprzywnica, 3—Łagów, 4—Nowa Słupia, 5—Nowy Korczyn, 6—Opatowiec, 7—Radoszyce, 8—Stopnica, 9—Wiślica.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis shows that the town squares in the towns studied represent low or medium levels of attractiveness, if seen from the perspective described in this study. This means that the attributes of urban public spaces have been poorly developed. The most attractive squares were the main squares of the largest towns, which regained municipal rights the earliest (Daleszyce, Łagów, and Stopnica). Those towns were able to use the financial means they received for the revitalisation of their squares, and their relatively large population enhanced the functional development of public spaces. Their weakness is in the shortage of green areas, resulting from common revitalisation trends, such as transforming squares from green to paved areas.

The town squares of the settlement units that were granted municipal rights over the last two to three years are usually small in area, and poorly equipped with small architectural elements or places where the inhabitants can meet. Their characteristic features include large green areas, weak functional diversification, and low buildings along the square frontage. These town squares are green decorations in the towns rather than meeting places and local event venues. The small population potential, the ageing population, many years of neglect of the housing substance, and limited interpersonal relations have caused the poor functional development of these squares and the disappearance of generally accepted aesthetic models. These towns do not meet the basic criteria of urbanity (a small population) and will not be able to develop a public space with the features described in the literature review.

In our evaluation, the lowest-rated square was the town square in Nowa Słupia. All of the elements of spatial order differed from the other destinations. It is a space devoid of public space attributes. The town square is a former marketplace, which gradually turned into a carpark, along with the development of tourist functions. For such a square to gain a basic function as a public square, it needs a complete transformation.

In transforming public squares, it is important to note that a public space must be designed to answer the inhabitants' needs and should reference the history and identity of the town. Revitalised town squares may not look the same in all small towns.

The considerations presented concern settlement units that functioned as villages several years ago. Gaining municipal rights in the 21st century created new challenges, both for the inhabitants and the local authorities. One such challenge is the creation of friendly public spaces that represent the town and is a place for social relations.

Based on the analysis of individual elements of the spatial order of town squares in new small towns, the following can be concluded:

1. The architectural–urban planning order in the towns in question was related to the number of inhabitants as well as the period over which a given settlement unit had municipal rights. A larger number of inhabitants (over 1000) had a positive influence on the functional diversification of the central squares and their development (e.g., Daleszyce, Radoszyce, and Stopnica), whereas a small number limited both the functional diversification and the number of small architectural elements found at the square (e.g., Nowy Korczyn, and Opatowiec). Moreover, in towns with a relatively large number of inhabitants, we observed a larger-than-average number of developments of higher-order services (legal, healthcare, and financial) compared to all of the settlement units under study. Those that were granted municipal rights the earliest (six to 14 years ago) managed to reshape their public spaces using EU and domestic funds for revitalising central squares (e.g., Daleszyce and Stopnica) better than the youngest towns (e.g., Opatowiec and Nowy Korczyn). The number of small architectural elements in the squares represented the history of the towns as well as the predominant Christian religion. The small new towns showed clear symptoms of public space sacralisation. The weakness of the architectural–urban planning order was the poor compactness of buildings situated along the square frontages as well as their poor technical conditions. The low compactness resulted mainly from the low value of the plots at the square and the lack of spatial development plans. This mostly concerned the smallest towns, situated peripherally in Świętokrzyskie province, that gained their municipal status in the last two to three years (Koprzywnica, Opatowiec, and Nowy Korczyn). The poor technical conditions of the buildings standing along the square frontage resulted from their age (the majority were built before and right after World War II and from the relatively low financial status of the ageing community), which is now urban but was still rural two to three years ago. The lack of financial resources for repairs fostered permanent degradation of the housing tissue.
2. The social order in the towns studied was not related to the number of inhabitants. The authors rated the elements of the social order in both larger towns that revitalised their squares (Daleszyce, Łagów, and Radoszyce) and in small settlement units that had not started renovations on their public spaces (Nowy Korczyn and Wiślica) highly. Smaller settlement units have a rich history connected to organising noblemen's meetings and general assemblies as early as the 14th century (cf. Section 2). Perhaps the resulting traditions contributed to preserving old amenities and to creating new amenities connected to shaping social relationships.
3. The aesthetic and green orders were largely related to the revitalisation of public spaces. The towns that already revitalised their central squares, liquidating natural greenery and paving the square's surface (e.g., Łagów and Daleszyce), presented high ratings for aesthetic order but low ratings for green order. In those towns, the authorities attempted to revive green areas in public space, but the effects were not always satisfactory. In towns where revitalisation had not yet taken place (e.g.,

Koprzywnica and Opatowiec), the green order of the central squares (natural green complexes) was highly rated, whereas their aesthetic order was rated poorly. The assessment of both orders in towns where central squares had been turned into car parks (e.g., Nowa Słupia) without natural greenery was rated poorly.

4. Creating a friendly public space (according to the requirements presented in the introduction) in small new towns, especially those situated peripherally in agricultural areas, requires time, financial means, vision, and engagement on the part of the local authorities, non-governmental organisations, and the inhabitants.

The research presented here is the first stage in the evaluation of the attractiveness of town squares in new small towns in Świętokrzyskie province. This attractiveness was evaluated from the researchers' point of view. The next stage should include evaluations of these public spaces from the users' perspectives (considering their mental comfort, and physical and hydrothermal existence within public space) as well as the perspectives of formal planning and management organisations (local authorities and politicians). This will make it possible to compare the technical results from this study with the governance-oriented aspects of planning and development for public squares using a technical approach with the opinions of public space users.

The material presented in this article can be used for comparisons by other researchers and practitioners who deal with similar issues. The results of this study may be applicable to small towns in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe that used to belong to the Eastern Block and had similar conditions of socioeconomic development.

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