

# SMALL VILLAGES AS PART OF THE LANDSCAPE: LANDSCAPE-BASED APPROACHES TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

Small rural municipalities represent a fundamental component of European cultural landscapes. Despite their importance, landscape planning and design approaches are often primarily focused on urban areas, while rural settlements receive less attention in contemporary landscape architecture research and practice. However, small municipalities are deeply embedded within their surrounding landscapes and play a crucial role in shaping rural spatial structures, ecological processes and local identity. This paper explores the relationship between small rural municipalities and the surrounding landscape, emphasising landscape-based approaches to sustainable rural development. The study focuses on selected examples of small municipalities in Slovakia that demonstrate innovative practices in landscape planning, green infrastructure implementation and nature-based solutions. These examples include projects addressing water management, biodiversity enhancement, public open spaces and the preservation of traditional agricultural landscapes. The research highlights how landscape architecture can contribute to improving the quality of rural environments through integrated design approaches that connect settlements with their surrounding agricultural and natural landscapes. Attention is given to the role of public spaces, ecological corridors, traditional landscape structures and community engagement in shaping resilient and attractive rural environments. The findings demonstrate that even small municipalities with limited resources can implement innovative landscape solutions that strengthen local identity, enhance ecosystem services and support sustainable rural development.

**Key words:** rural landscapes; small municipalities; landscape architecture; nature-based solutions; green infrastructure

## Introduction

Small rural municipalities represent an essential component of European cultural landscapes, shaping spatial structures, ecological processes and local identity. Despite their importance, landscape architecture research and practice have traditionally focused more on urban environments, while rural settlements remain less explored, particularly in the context of contemporary sustainable design approaches (Jančovičová & Štěpánková, 2012; Schüppel & Staudte, 2025). In recent decades, landscape architecture has increasingly addressed the integration of environmental, social and spatial aspects through nature-based solutions and green infrastructure. These approaches have proven effective in improving the quality of public spaces, enhancing biodiversity and supporting sustainable development in both urban and peri-urban contexts (Tóth et al., 2014; Tóth et al., 2018; Čibik et al., 2019). At the same time, research highlights the importance of transforming existing structures and underused spaces, including rural centres and public areas, through context-sensitive and value-based design strategies (Čibik et al., 2020; Bechera et al., 2022). Rural landscapes, however, present specific challenges related to limited financial and institutional capacities, as well as fragmented development processes. Nevertheless, they also offer significant opportunities for the application of innovative landscape-architectural approaches, including the restoration of traditional landscape structures, the revitalisation of public spaces and the integration of cultural and ecological values (Kuczman & Paganová, 2024; Paganová & Kuczman, 2024). Recent studies demonstrate that even small-scale interventions, such as the redesign of rural streets or public spaces, can significantly contribute to improving environmental quality and local identity (Karzhauov et al., 2025; Bellérová & Hus, 2025). An important aspect of contemporary rural development is the role of participatory and bottom-up approaches, which enable local communities to actively shape their environment and contribute to the creation of public spaces and landscape structures (Miklášová et al., 2022). In this context, landscape architecture serves as a mediating discipline that connects expert knowledge with local needs and values. Current research and international initiatives emphasise the need for integrated, landscape-based approaches that consider the landscape as a complex system linking environmental, social and economic dimensions. Projects such as *Landscape in Focus* highlight the importance of providing practical tools and methodological support for small municipalities, enabling

them to implement sustainable solutions despite limited resources (Smetanová et al., 2025; Štemberová et al., 2025). This paper builds on these theoretical and practical frameworks and explores selected examples of small municipalities in Slovakia that demonstrate innovative approaches to landscape planning, public space design and nature-based solutions. The aim is to analyse how landscape-based approaches can contribute to sustainable rural development, strengthen local identity and enhance the quality of rural environments.

### **Material and methods**

The study is based on a qualitative research approach combining case study analysis with landscape-architectural interpretation. It focuses on selected small rural municipalities in Slovakia that demonstrate innovative approaches to landscape planning, public space design and the implementation of nature-based solutions. The primary materials consisted of project documentation, planning materials, photographic records and field observations. Additional sources included methodological frameworks and outputs of the *Landscape in Focus* initiative, which provide tools for landscape-based planning and evaluation in small municipalities. The methodological approach consisted of three main steps: 1. *Selection of case studies* based on their relevance to landscape-based rural development and the application of innovative or replicable solutions; 2. *Analysis of spatial and functional relationships* between settlements and their surrounding landscapes, with emphasis on green infrastructure, water management, public spaces and traditional landscape structures; 3. *Comparative evaluation* of selected examples, focusing on their contribution to landscape quality, ecological stability, local identity and community engagement. This approach enabled the identification of key principles and transferable strategies for the integration of small municipalities into their broader landscape context.

### **Results**

The analysis of selected case studies demonstrates that small rural municipalities can implement effective landscape-based solutions despite limited resources. The examined examples show that targeted interventions—such as the revitalisation of public spaces, restoration of traditional landscape structures and application of nature-based solutions—can significantly improve landscape quality and functionality. The results highlight the importance of integrating settlements with their surrounding landscapes through green infrastructure, ecological corridors and water management measures. At the same time, community involvement and context-sensitive design were identified as key factors contributing to the success and sustainability of these interventions.

### **Discussion**

The results confirm that even small rural municipalities can effectively implement landscape-based solutions, supporting previous findings on the role of landscape architecture in improving rural environments through targeted, context-sensitive interventions (Čibik et al., 2020; Bechera et al., 2022). The identified importance of integrating public spaces, ecological structures and water management measures aligns with broader approaches to sustainable landscape design and multifunctional land use (Tóth et al., 2014; Tóth et al., 2018). Furthermore, the emphasis on community involvement reflects the significance of participatory processes in shaping successful rural projects, as demonstrated in bottom-up initiatives and small-scale public space transformations (Miklášová et al., 2022). The findings also support current research highlighting that innovative design approaches, even at a limited scale, can strengthen local identity and contribute to the long-term resilience of rural landscapes (Kuczman & Paganová, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

The study demonstrates that small rural municipalities can play an active role in sustainable landscape development through targeted, landscape-based interventions. Even with limited resources, the integration of public spaces, ecological structures and community-driven approaches can significantly enhance landscape quality, resilience and local identity.



Fig. 1: Korzo Zálesie, an award-winning wooden promenade in the municipality of Zálesie, designed by P. Derevenec and V. Krumpolec, AŽ PROJEKT (Source: Archive of Naše Zálesičko Civic Association).



Fig. 2: One of the award-winning park squares in the municipality of Vlčany, designed by A. Tóth and T. Pavelka (Source: Attila Tóth).



Fig. 3: The Eco Centre in Moravské Lieskové was created in the area of a former agricultural cooperative and granary (Source: Archive of Žito v sýpke Civic Association).

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## Souhrn

Článek se zabývá rolí malých venkovských obcí jako nedílné součásti krajiny a zkoumá krajinářské přístupy k udržitelnému rozvoji venkova. Na základě vybraných slovenských případových studií poukazuje na to, jak mohou řešení založená na přírodě, zelená infrastruktura a oživení veřejných prostranství zlepšit kvalitu krajiny, ekologickou stabilitu a místní identitu. Zjištění ukazují, že i drobné, komunitně orientované zásahy mohou významně přispět k odolnému a atraktivnímu venkovskému prostředí.

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