Fabrica Litterarum Polono-Italica
2025, nr 2 (10), s. 1–12

www.fabricalitterarum.com
ISSN 2658-185X
https://doi.org/10.31261/FLPI.2025.10.16

ARTYKUŁY I ROZPRAWY

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The Taming of the Wild*

Abstract

The increasing development and tourism in the mountains have caused significant ecological degradation. This paper explores the historical, architectural and environmental impact of human activity, as a new anthropogenic layer, into once pristine wilderness. Through a case study – Demänovská Valley in Slovakian Low Tatras – the research traces expansion of infrastructure since the early 20th century, planned mass recreation in the late 20th century, and their impacts on landscape transformation. The research highlights the ongoing conflict between economic conflict and environmental conservation. Despite efforts to protect the valley, rapid construction continues of unrestrained development on this fragile mountain ecosystem.

Keywords: mountain architecture, modernistic planning, landscape architecture, Demänovská dolina, Low Tatras development

Parole chiave: architettura di montagna, pianificazione modernista, architettura del paesaggio, Demänovská Dolina, sviluppo dei Bassi Tatra

* This paper was published within the project VEGA no. 1/0063/24 "Heritage values of the architecture of the second half of the 20th century: identification and methods of protection" deducted at the Faculty of Architecture and Design STU and at the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (Bratislava, Slovakia) and thanks to the Fulbright Slovak Student Program.

Can wilderness still be found in the mountains? As the number of tourists rises and mountainous terrains grow ever more accessible, human activity is leaving a visible impact on the environment. The traces left behind by previous visitors are transforming the landscape for those who come after them. Those who come to explore the distant views are blinded by the crowds. Demänovská Valley in Slovakia, illustrates the relationship between humans, the mountain environment, and the architecture of the buildings that have been constructed there, examining in-depth the infrastructure already built or still on the drawing board, along with future consequences of this development.

The valley is a major natural reserve located within the Low Tatras of the Western Carpathian range and supposedly one of the most protected among Slovakia's mountains. Spanning three climate zones, the valley hosts endangered endemic species, serves as a critical source of drinking water for the urban Liptov region north of the valley,[1] and has an exceptional karst cave system. The valley of Demänovská Dolina ends at Chopok, a mountain whose ski trails and bicycle routes attract visitors from all over Europe and across the globe.

What used to make Demänovská Valley so wild and captivating has been disappearing due to increased development and exploitation of the valley's natural resources and once-extensive forests. It has now reached a critical point, prompting activists and experts to take a stand. They have established a non-profit organization called "Pre Dolinu" [For the Valley] to protect what remains of Demänovská Valley's natural environment.[2]

What happened to the valley has also become a topic of heated architectural debate,[3] critical evaluations,[4] and documentaries.[5] Several researchers from across different scientific fields have studied its unique attributes, significance, and ongoing degradation. Environmentalist Pavel Herich analyzed the habitats and examined options for sustainable management (Herich 2022) and the landscape's transformation over the past 60 years is discussed in "Development versus conservation: evaluations of landscape structure changes in Demänovská Valley, Slovakia" (Krtička et al. 2018). Other publications, like *Antropocén* (Pokorný & Stroh 2020),

1 The chief city in the Liptov region is Liptovský Mikuláš, with a population of above 30,000, and seat of a district with over 73,000 permanent residents.

2 https://predolinu.sk/.

3 There was a discussion about the region's architecture held at Diera do Sveta (Hole in the World) Cultural Center with Henrieta Moravčíková, Peter Moravčík, and Martin Zaiček. See https://www.facebook.com/events/366344491249044/?locale=de_DE.

4 The entire development of Demänovská Dolina, specifically the Hotel Damián Jasna, was "awarded" the Brutus Prize for Worst Architecture of 2021: https://www.archinfo.sk/diskusia/blog/architektura-vseobecne/brutus-2021-vysledky-stvrteho-rocnika-anticeny-za-architekturu.html.

5 One such documentary was *EKOďalej* [*(R)evolúcia v Demänovskej doline*].

have contributed to a better understanding of the complexity of anthropogenic layers.

The point may have been reached of mountain wildernesses threatened even within a national park. Recently, the density in Demänovská Valley of people during the winter skiing season has climbed so high that the ski center's majority owner is considering a limit in the number of visitors (Herich 2022: 31). Since 2006, the valley has experienced significant growth in popularity and swelling development interest, which resulted in an exponential rise of build-up areas, tripled since 2007 (Krtička et al. 2018: 1160). In the meantime, more than 30% of the valley's forests have been cut down (Herich 2022: 24). These rapid changes are a consequence of the region's economic transformation since the collapse of the Iron Curtain. The introduction of capitalism and free markets shifted oversight of Demänovská Valley from total government control to a patchwork of individual interests.

Seeking to uncover the causes and effects that led to the (possible over-) development of the valley, questions to ask include whether the supply-demand cycle should be held to blame and why the resort was ever put in a valley considered such a treasured location. Examining phenomena from the late 20th century, it becomes clear how leisure time, previous planned economy, and mass tourism influenced the colonization of the mountains. Both Czechoslovakia's reintroduction of the five-day workweek in 1968 and an increase in the number of vacation days turned recreation into a necessary instrument of central planning. Recreation resource planning was a main pillar of propaganda in the second half of the 20th century when Czechoslovakia was a socialist country and the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (ROH), the national trade union center in Czechoslovakia from 1946 to 1990, was able to take control over the organization of recreation and tourism. The most attractive locations in the country thereafter became recreational centers under the aegis of "Regionalization of Tourism" (Moravčíková 2013: 131).

The second half of the 20th century saw a battle unfold between planners and ecologists on one side and developers on the other. Before the 1989 Velvet Revolution, "developer" would have meant the state. Július Burkovský provides a historical overview of how national parks were declared in Czechoslovakia, highlighting attempts to establish protected zones in the first half of the 20th century and the continued struggle after World War II (Burkovský 2014). Sources from architectural journals such as *Slovenský Staviteľ* and *Projekt* offer insight into the evolving architectural and urban discourse, revealing ambitions to expand infrastructure against the backdrop of contemporary political changes. They trace interventions in the landscape of Demänovská Valley and place them in a broader context. An integral part is an anthology edited by Jana Tichá of papers by architects, historians, theorists, and landscape planners that examines the topic from various perspectives (Tichá 2017).

Unraveling the utopian vision of Demänovská Dolina before the era of planned mass recreation means going deeper into history. Bold ideas were proposed during the interwar period to join the mountains with the city below, some of which did materialize. While efforts had begun in the 1930s with the construction of roads and even earlier when the caves in the valley were opened to the public, it culminated in 1957 with the opening of a chairlift routed over the summit of Chopok to link the northern Demänovská valley with the southern Bystrá valley.

The construction of an environment and recreation center transformed the valley into a destination for leisure, visibly altered by human activity to accommodate it. As transportation across Czechoslovakia grew faster, shortening the time between desired destinations, more leisure time became available. Yet even the Industrial Revolution itself and its "radical transformation of time and space itself" can have caused this phenomenon (Pokorný 2020: 146).

A hybrid research methodology, integrating historical analysis, mapping techniques and field surveys was employed to study what led to Demänovská Valley's development as a major tourist destination. Historical research was conducted through extensive archival work and a review of contemporary journals. Mapping methods were used to compare changes over several decades, while comprehensive field surveys examined current conditions. Additionally, a review of findings from recent scientific studies were reviewed and these findings were integrated to ascertain the transformations that had occurred and the consequences thereof.

Taming Process

Humankind has been domesticating the wilderness since the Agricultural Revolution, when plowing fields and harvesting crops forged the nature-man relationship, leading to the end of the previously nomadic lifestyle and the formation of permanent settlements. As they grew, the presence of wilderness within them diminished. However, the wilderness and backcountry beyond their borders were considered dangerous, full of natural traps, predators, and outlaws.

Early cities lacked a vital connection between humans and nature. It was through trade, mainly along the Silk Road and with the Middle East, that medieval Europeans became inspired by Islamic gardens and started to develop green areas of their own, such as parks, in urban structures. These parks, however, were strictly separated from the "wilds of untamed nature" (Corner & Schiller 1990: 63).

During the Middle Ages, the Low Tatras were wild, pristine, and concealed valuable resources. Miners and loggers inhabited its valleys and slopes, with sheep eventually grazing the deforested terrains. The shepherds tending these flocks altered the mountain environment further by slowing forest succession and thus enlarging the alpine meadows (Herich 2022: 4). When logging became unsustainable in the 18th century, laws were passed to regulate it.[6] Otherwise, nothing much was done to alter the environment of the mountains, nor was the landscape managed in any planned way that altered its appearance.

In contrast, gardens and parks were meticulously organized and symmetrical. In the early 18th century, English landscape architects fashioned garden landscapes with significant variability in forms, irregularity of shapes, and views to distant horizons, all inspired by the Far East. By the end of the 18th century, "roughness of the picturesque was preferred over smoothness of the beautiful" (Corner & Schiller 1990: 71).

When the Industrial Revolution reached the European continent in the 19th century, it acted as a catalyst for mass use of landscapes. Because of the non-industrial appearance and purity of mountains, scientists and explorers sought to venture into this wilderness, seeking the wonders of the unknown. Expeditions were organized to conquer summits and upper-class tourists began spending their leisure time immersed in nature. Hotels and sanatoriums were introduced into these once-untouched terrains, and conservation started to take shape.[7] Environmental protection was viewed in two ways: as preserving nature to shield it from industrial uniformity, and as an evolution of landscape, following the dynamic changes in culture and tradition (Körner 2017: 58).

During the 19th century, as the colonization of the mountains progressed, the Low Tatras were ignored in favor of the nearby High Tatras,[8] where the first villages, hotels, sanatoriums, huts, hiking trails, and railways were built. However, what had been neglected changed with the discovery of the Demänovská Cave of Liberty in 1921,[9] which catalyzed the development of the valley.

Tourism developed as an industry in the Low Tatras while Slovak architect Dušan Jurkovič[10] served as a director of the Commissariat for the Protection of

6 In 1769, Maria Theresa issued a proclamation on conservation of forests (the Slovak edition is from 1770 – orádek hor aneb lesuv zachování) (Forest-Portal, 2021).

7 Yellowstone National Park, the world's first national park, was established in 1872.

8 The High Tatras are the highest-elevation mountain range in the Carpathians (and also in Slovakia).

9 The cave was discovered by Alois Král in 1921.

10 Dušan Samuel Jurkovič, a major figure in Slovakian architecture, headed the Commissariat from 1919 to 1922. It had been established after the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 to oversee and protect Slovakia's historical and architectural heritage.

Monuments in Slovakia (Komisariát na ochranu pamiatok na Slovensku). Jurkovič was aware of the impact any unplanned building would have and strongly advocated to "protect the valley from the ravages of speculative and commercial enterprises and various developments" (Jurkovič 1923: 256). He was tasked with access infrastructure for the Demänovská Cave of Liberty, where the architecture contrasted with natural karst formations. Although the approach then aligned with modern architectural thought, which favored autonomous, self-referential forms over imitations of nature (Corner & Schiller 1990: 73), this autonomy of form meant a lack of attention towards the landscape and architectural conventions dedicated primarily to the building itself (Frampton 1991: 42).

While modern architectural ideas were establishing their own identity, increasing awareness of environmental preservation sparked talks about how to protect distinctive landscapes. The first effort to set aside Demänovská Valley as a protected area had begun in 1922, inspired by Yellowstone National Park in the United States, when Ján Roubal, a Czech entomologist and professor at Slovak Technical University,[11] proposed the first systematic plan (Burkovský 2014: 4). Unfortunately, his efforts were unsuccessful. The only achievement happened in 1929, when part of the valley was listed as a protected reserve, thanks to the efforts by Ján Volko-Starohorský, a forester[12] (Burkovský 2014: 4).

An access road was constructed in the early 1930s to make Demänovská Valley more accessible (Palúdzka-Demänová 1931: 18–20). Visionaries likewise proposed ambitious, even utopian plans for developing the region. Alojz Lutonský, a Czech speleologist and advocate of hiking for exercise, envisioned a chairlift connecting two valleys in the Low Tatras that would traverse the summit of Chopok.[13] An even bolder proposal called for a chairlift to start in Lipotvský Mikuláš (Nemcová 2016: 18). Plans to build the Chopok chairlift were launched in the late 1940s, as the country recovered from World War II.

Attitudes toward the development of the region changed significantly in 1948, as the political winds shifted in Czechoslovakia.[14] Tensions arose between those seeking to develop tourist infrastructure and environmentalists promoting con-

11 Ján Roubal was an advocate of protecting the natural environment and was actively involved in the Slovak Karst Protection Committee. His influence as an entomologist and academic helped shape early conservation policies in Slovakia.

12 He was able to take advantage of his position within the state forestry administration to overcome initial resistance from industries and local interests and ultimately to lobby successfully for designation of Demänovská Dolina as a protected landscape.

13 A native of Liptovský Mikuláš, his leadership of the Liptov branch of the Slovak Tourist and Ski Club (Klub slovenských turistov a lyžiarov) in the 1940s was instrumental in his advocacy of infrastructure projects.

14 Following seizure of power by the Czechoslovak Communist Party, the country became a satellite of Soviet Union and was aligned with its economical and ideological philosophy.

servation. Even as Lubor Marek,[15] an architect and urban planner active during the mid-20th century, was designing chairlift stations and land-use zoning of the valley for different uses, efforts were underway to declare Demänovská Valley a national park. To protect the valley, sheep grazing and stone quarrying were prohibited in 1948 (Slovenská turistika 1948: 9). In the next year, the Directorate for Tourism in the Commission for Industry and Trade (Riaditeľstvo pre cestovný ruch Povereníctva priemyslu a obchodu) approved construction of a tourist center (Khandl et al. 2014: 121). In 1957, the chairlift was completed, and, in the following year, the promotion of the Low Tatras as a premier international tourist destination commenced (Burkovský 2014: 6), necessitating the update of land-use zoning (Oríšek 1958).

Tensions simmered throughout the 1960s between proponents of development and champions of conservation. In 1962, the Low Tatras were recognized as a region of international importance (Burkovský 2014: 6) and efforts were made to balance tourism infrastructure with environmental protection (Kodoň 1964: 27). Acknowledging the fragility of natural habitats, the Slovak Chamber of Architects addressed future development and protection of the Low Tatras (Slovenský Národný Archív 1965), and yet, already in 1965, heavy visitor traffic had diminished the recreational quality of Demänovská Valley. Contemporary environmentalists were still unsuccessfully endeavoring for legal protection of the valley as a site of national heritage (Burkovský 2014: 6). Instead of conservation of its remaining natural resources, the future of Demänovská Dolina as a recreational center had already been solidified when its incorporation as a municipality a year earlier in 1964 led to rezoning of the valley to account for greater tourist-related development. The final plans considerably altered what had been the declared intention of rezoning and also the winning proposal for it. While spreading visitors equally throughout the valley had been originally contemplated to ease the strain on environmentally fragile areas, final adjustments concentrated all tourist-related functions in a single location (Slovenský Národný Archív 1965–66).

By the early 1970s, architects were voicing their own opinions about the growing urbanization of the mountain landscape, with contemporary sources remarking about the targeted landscape resembling one man trying to escape (Skoček 1972: 60–61). At this point, urbanization of the wilderness had reached the stage "were all territorial demands for recreation in Demänovská Valley to be accepted, development of the landscape would have expanded to a level that recreation would finally lose its meaning" (Valentovič 1973: 40–41). Ten years later,

15 He was involved in the architectural planning and design of facilities to enhance accessibility and visitor experience, as well as delineating areas for recreational activities, accommodation, and conservation for the region's sustainable development.

Milan Kodoň reflected on his previous thoughts and considered the technical interventions of the previous decades to have upset the environmental balance, causing permanent deterioration of habitats (Kodoň 1974: 5–9). In 1978, after years of advocacy from ecologists, Low Tatras National Park (NAPANT) was finally established and Demänovská Valley was incorporated into the park, even after a recreational center had already been constructed inside of it.

Yet even with a national park now in existence, development in the valley continued apace into the 1980s, though economic constraints were slowing it down. Even with strict limits on development put in place by the late 1990s to prevent further expansion[16] (Herich 2022: 12), further construction would eventually be allowed after 2010, now driven by changes in land-use zoning and additional land zoned for development.[17]

Development Wins Over the Landscape

Tracing back the relationship between pristine mountains and human encroachment reveals an evolution from fear of *terra incognita* to exploitation of resources, and ultimately to the region becoming a curiosity and attraction. Currently, the allure of enjoying leisure time in the mountains is no longer enough. There are now various amusements to satisfy visitors' needs. Mountain terrains face environmental tension, now transformed into a conflict between development and conservation (Krtička et al 2018), luxury versus humility (Jurkovič 1923), and continuing disputes between planned architecture and what has already been built. Demänovská Valley exemplifies the never-ending clash even between profit-driven developers and idealistic ecologists, with development and luxury accommodations now taking the lead. Although Corner's "roughness of the picturesque" as more attractive scenery remains true, it comes only from a "smooth and beautiful" comfort zone (Corner & Schiller 1990).

Each era has seen similar confrontations. In the interwar period, Jurkovič successfully protected the valley against extensive development even as he facilitated

16 In 1996, the region authority governing the Low Tatras set a maximum bed capacity of 3,450 for Demänovská Dolina. Two years later, in 1998, Žilina Region published its master plan, which prioritized the preservation of Low Tatras National Park and a reduction of development pressure on Demänovská Dolina.

17 New land-use zoning was approved in 2012. Shortly afterward, amendments to the plan increased bed capacities to the current accommodation level of over 5,000 beds. With ongoing construction, this figure is expected to rise to nearly 8,000.

access to one of its greatest attractions, the Demänovská Cave of Liberty, which is now considered a turning point in the influx of tourists visiting the region. Another tipping point was the construction of the access road. Alojz Lutonský's grand plans, of which only fragments would come to fruition, also caused significant harm. Though the chairlift was a technical masterpiece, the increase in the valley's popularity brought with it unforeseen consequences. Yet his entire vision, specifically the chairlift from the city, would have prevented the traffic issues that plague the access road today. Despite the larger investment required at first, what finally would have come from a chairlift directly from Liptovský Mikuláš might have been more beneficial in the long term.

Further large-scale interventions starting from the second half of the 20th century – though initially well-intended – evolved into even more ambitious and harmful developments. The inconsistency between the conservation of nature and enhancing its attractiveness led to ever-increasing bed capacity and uninterrupted building process. Today, a recreation center and many accommodation facilities continue to operate in Demänovská Valley, marred by constant construction noise and land within the park treated as a perpetual building site. In terms of the conservation of Demänovská Valley's wild landscape and environmental protection, the logic appears to contradict Körner's definition (Körner 2017). Industrial homogeneity is retained even as development is continuously evolving and several questions have arisen: Could there be a recreational center within the national park? Could nature adapt to accelerating human intervention?

An analogy can be drawn between Demänovská Dolina as a recreational park and urban gardens found in cities. Just as medieval urban structures separated tamed nature from the pristine wilderness, the growing urbanism of the valley is fragmenting[18] the remaining wilderness surrounding it.

Save the Valley organized a petition drive to stop construction and look for a solution to the traffic problems Demänovská Valley currently experiences, with 113,613 people ultimately signing the petition. The recreational center has ceased to be composed of just the landscape, despite its inability to exist without it, yet. It seems that Demänovská Valley's environment is incapable of coexisting with the recreational center and natural science experts are now warning of the loss of rare habitats and the retreat of the natural landscape as urbanization spreads (Herich 2022). Here, architecture has become a monument to human dominance. No longer blending into the landscape, a fleeting need for kitschy luxury is desired now and the various hotels, other buildings and their attached infrastructure, all scarcely deserving of the term "architecture," have already tamed the wilderness and are now in the process of replacing it.

18 Fragmentation of ecosystems, in (Herich 2022: 48).

While Slovakia has long enjoyed abundant drinking water, as bed capacity doubles for a sewage system designed for just half the number of beds,[19] Liptovský Mikuláš and the urban region north of Demänovská Valley face a drop in available drinking water and sewage runoff contaminating it instead, with massive deforestation potentially aggravating the loss of drinking water further. The absence of a viable root structure, erosion, and the forest road effectively draining water are creating an imbalance in underground water (Herich 2022). In contrast to second half of 20th century socialism, when the land was confiscated for the "benefit of all of society," the now-privatized land in Demänovská Valley might metamorphize into a private resort for a select few, well-heeled people. As Herich noted, the owner of the ski center is considering a limit to the number of visitors that would equal the near future's projected bed capacity (Herich 2022: 31), therefore fencing off the valley's natural environment for the benefit of an exclusive, privileged few. Once a sanctuary for all, Demänovská Valley's parkland risks being transformed into a commercial space with restricted access, with entry dictated by economic means rather than intrinsic value.

The wilderness, as anyone imagines it, has morphed into an illusion after the romantic idea of the lonesome figure trekking in the wilderness, free from everyday urban life, broke down completely during the 20th century. In this century, it has now disintegrated into an urban landscape where "virgin wilderness no longer exists" (Pokorný 2020: 180).

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19 The projected number of beds the sewage system could support dates from 50 years ago.

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Abstrakt

Oswajanie dziczy

Rosnąca ekspansja człowieka i rozwój turystyki w górach spowodowały znaczną degradację ekologiczną. W artykule zbadano historyczny, architektoniczny i środowiskowy

wpływ działalności człowieka jako nowej warstwy antropogenicznej na niegdyś dziewiczą dziką przyrodę. Poprzez studium przypadku – chodzi o Dolinę Demianowską w słowackich Tatrach Niskich – autorka śledzi rozbudowę infrastruktury od początku XX wieku, planowaną masową rekreację pod koniec XX wieku i jej wpływ na przekształcenie krajobrazu. Badanie podkreśla utrzymujący się konflikt między interesem gospodarczym a ochroną środowiska. Pomimo wysiłków na rzecz ochrony doliny, w tym delikatnym górskim ekosystemie trwa szybka rozbudowa i niepohamowany rozwój infrastruktury.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura górska, planistyka, architektura krajobrazu, Dolina Demianowska, rozwój infrastruktury w Tatrach Niskich