



Joanna Gronostajska-Kadecka*

Spa and wellness architecture: Definition and conceptualization

Abstract

The spa and wellness trend is a rapidly growing movement in the architectural industry. This topic aims to define and clarify the concept of spa and wellness architecture, which has not been thoroughly researched despite its frequent mention in both popular and scientific literature. The author addresses the issue by starting with a general definition and then moving on to a specific classification of the various types of structures that fall under spa and wellness architecture. To define this concept, the author first discusses the terms architecture, spa, and wellness separately before synthesizing them into a cohesive definition. The above-mentioned research resulted in a classification in which five groups of contemporary facilities were distinguished, defined according to the previously established definition: spas, saunas, thermal baths, baths, and spa & wellness hotels. The research provides a clear definition of spa and wellness architecture. It is based on available scientific literature and popular sources, ensuring its universal applicability within the architectural industry. Furthermore, within the term spa and wellness architecture, five groups of architectural facilities or assumptions are characterized. The spatial and functional programs of these categories are determined by the types of treatments and relaxation practices offered at each facility.

Key words: architecture, spa, wellness, health services

Introduction

In recent years, the demand for health and well-being services has increased significantly, largely due to the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. This shift in social preferences has influenced various industries, including architecture (Choudhary, Qadir 2021). Over the last decade, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of buildings designed to offer health-promoting services. Consequently, a slogan has emerged in both literature and the industry: *spa and wellness architecture*. However, this term is often used without a precise definition or a systematic understanding of its scope¹. In the state of research on this topic, some publications discuss the health aspects of spa and wellness architecture (Chinwe 2023), spa and wellness tourism (Dryglas 2012), and sustainable design of spa and wellness facil-

ities (Singh 2024). However, no publication was found that would be devoted to a theoretical treatise on the definition of spa and wellness architecture itself. This is a significant scientific gap, which means that part of the literature from the state of research presented above does not analyze all facilities that may fall within the scope of architecture and spa.

This article is organized into two main sections. The first part seeks to provide a clear definition of spa and wellness architecture, based on an analysis and synthesis of available literature sources, particularly dictionaries. In the second part, groups of spa and wellness architecture facilities were created by comparing their features.

Definitions

No clear and universally accepted definition of *spa and wellness architecture* has been found in the literature sources. However, the term frequently appears in everyday language and popular science publications². In order to define this term for this

* ORCID: 0000-0003-0627-9930. Faculty of Architecture, Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Poland, e-mail: joanna.gronostajska-kadecka@pwr.edu.pl

¹ The study focuses on architectural assumptions. While existing literature addresses the issues concerning the tourism industry, it also reveals a gap in the proper definition of spa and wellness facilities (Abram, Kosińska 2020).

² In the collections of the publicly available online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* in English, there is an entry for *Spa architecture*. The article is mainly based on the historical genesis of the facilities where water therapy services were offered (Wikipedia 2022).

study, the definition of the term *architecture* and the terms *spa* and *wellness* were discussed separately, and then their synthesis was made. According to the Collins dictionary and PWN dictionary³, *architecture* (Latin from Greek *architéktōn* – builder) is the art of planning, designing, and constructing buildings. In the encyclopedia, this definition expands to include aspects related to meeting people's multiple physical, material and cultural needs. The definition of *spa* and *wellness* (*wellbeing*)⁴ is much more complex because these are relatively new terms still subject to modifications. Many sources state that *spa* comes from Latin and means *Sanus per Aquam*, which translates into English as health through water (Błądek, Błądek and Manikowski 2013). In the PWN dictionary, the word *spa* has three primary meanings: 1) *care treatments aimed at moisturizing and nourishing the skin; also: cosmetics used for such treatments*; 2) *a centre offering such treatments*; 3) *a hot tub* (Słownik języka polskiego PWN 2022b). Some sources indicate that the term comes from a city in Belgium called Spa, located near Liège. In the 18th century, this city was the destination of many European royal families due to the valuable mineral water springs there (Britannica 2022). The concept of *wellness* was defined in the 1950s in the United States, when a healthy lifestyle was popularized among the American community, contributing to maintaining good psycho-physical condition (Błądek, Błądek and Manikowski 2013). One of the doctors who popularized the term *wellness* was Herbert L. Dunn, author of a work published in 1961 entitled *High-Level Wellness: A Collection of Twenty-Nine Short Talks on Different Aspects of the Theme "High-Level Wellness for Man and Society"* (Dunn 1961; Zimmer 2010). The concept of *wellness* was created from a combination of two other terms: *wellbeing* and *fitness*. Although this definition was formulated in the 20th century, practices aimed at improving wellbeing were known and applied in ancient times. In India, traditional Ayurvedic medicine, dating back to 3000–1500 BCE, assumed that maintaining harmony between body, mind, and spirit prevented disease and promoted health. The theory of the Ayurvedic concept was translated into practice in the form of yoga and meditation, which are also used today as adjunctive therapies. Holistic aspects of treatment⁵ also found their manifestations in Chinese culture, where 2,000 years ago, acupuncture, herbal medicine, *qi gong*⁶ and *tai chi*⁷ were used to improve the state of the spirit, body and mind (Global Wellness Institute n.d.). Today, *wellness* terminology includes various types of treatments, e.g.,

massages, baths, sports and artistic activities, and an appropriate diet to improve or maintain wellbeing and physical fitness generally (Słownik języka polskiego PWN 2022c). In Poland, *wellness* services were developed in the 1990s (Hotelarz 2010).

By integrating the definitions mentioned above, we can create a clear definition of *spa and wellness architecture*. This original definition states that *spa and wellness architecture* encompasses all buildings, small architectural features, urban complexes, and other construction elements designed to support users' health and wellbeing, with a particular emphasis on water's therapeutic properties⁸. According to the definition provided, a facility or concept that meets certain requirements can be classified as *spa and wellness architecture*. On the ArchDaily portal, the healthcare architecture category is divided into three subcategories: healthcare architecture, wellbeing, veterinary and research. The wellbeing subcategory includes spas, saunas, bath houses, and therms (ArchDaily n.d.). When analyzing facilities that utilize water for therapeutic purposes, it is essential to consider the strong historical connection between spas, healing functions and accommodation – an association that dates back to ancient times (Milewska, Włodarczyk 2015). In recent decades, this has led to a new type of facility known as *spa and wellness hotels*. These hotels distinguish themselves from traditional accommodation services by offering bathing services alongside lodging. Based on this understanding, the following original definition for the term “spa and wellness hotel” is proposed: a facility that primarily provides accommodation services while also offering services designed to meet the health-related needs of its guests, particularly emphasizing the healing properties of water.

It is proposed to categorize *spa and wellness architecture* facilities into subgroups based on the collected data and considerations regarding the origins of concepts (Fig. 1)⁹.

Spa and wellness architecture – classification

Summarizing the previous chapter, *spa and wellness architecture* should be designed with a primary focus on enhancing the well-being of its users. Such buildings must be designed with great accuracy, because human well-being is associated with all their senses. Even though their functional program is based on various water-related services (in its various states of matter), it is essential to create the so-called atmosphere¹⁰ (Feniak n.d.). Therefore, when designing *spa and wellness* buildings, one cannot focus only on the form of the facility, but also on aspects such as sound (acoustics), light, structure (material), and smell. Another, no less important element is the landscape surrounding *spa and wellness architecture*. Numerous scientific studies have

³ Both English and Polish dictionaries were used in this research to more precisely define the research subject. The study initially relied on Polish dictionaries, but following a deeper analysis and the preparation of the article in English, the sources were expanded to include English-language dictionaries.

⁴ The term *wellness* is assumed to come from this word (Global Wellness Institute n.d.).

⁵ This is in relation to holistic medicine, which was based on the assumption that the state of mind, spirit, and body mutually influence each other and that the whole organism should be treated to heal (Słownik języka polskiego PWN 2022a).

⁶ Qigong (from Chinese qi-life energy, gong-mastering a skill) is a unique exercise that stimulates life energy flow to increase immunity and self-healing processes (Portal Fizjoterapeuty 2021).

⁷ Tai chi is a form of martial art originating from China, which involves slow, fluid movements combined with deep breathing. The effects of performing these exercises are to strengthen the upper and lower body, stretch and calm the mind (Bury-Motył 2020).

⁸ In this case, health-related needs include prevention, rehabilitation, treatments and exercises improving health and beauty, and similar spa-related ones. Hospital and sanatorium treatment are not included.

⁹ The research focuses on spatial architecture with *spa and wellness* functions; therefore, cities and health resort complexes were excluded from the division.

¹⁰ Atmospheric factors are background conditions in the environment, e.g., temperature, scent, noise, music, and lighting (Heide, Lærdal and Grønhaug 2007).

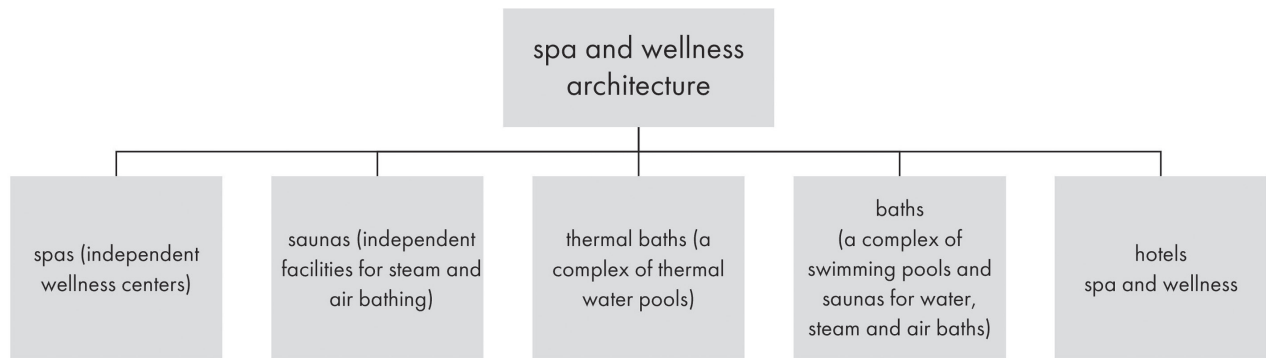


Fig. 1. Spa and wellness architecture – systematics of subgroups or complexes of facilities (elaborated by J. Gronostajska-Kadecka)

Il. 1. Architektura spa i wellness – systematyka podgrup lub zespołów obiektów (oprac. J. Gronostajska-Kadecka)

shown that being surrounded by nature positively affects human well-being and contributes to improved health.

Additionally, properly designed green spaces accompanying spa and wellness architecture can help treat specific diseases and ailments (Zhang et al. 2024). Nature's inspirations can also be seen in the building itself and its interiors. Spa and wellness architecture often features streamlined, organic forms and natural materials such as stone, wood, amber, linen, and cotton textiles. Their appropriate combination in the interior positively impacts the spa and wellness user experience.

This chapter briefly describes the subgroups of facilities included in the spa and wellness architecture taxonomy (Fig. 1).

Spa

Despite the apparent dominance of the spa and wellness hotels within the taxonomy of spa and wellness architecture, there is a growing emergence of independent spa facilities across Europe. They are most often located in the centres of large and medium-sized cities, and their offer is focused on biological regeneration services, including core treatments such as massages, baths, and body and facial therapies. Depending on the user's needs, it is possible to choose one specific service or a package consisting of several treatments. Such facilities are referred to as Day Spa (Spaeden 2021). Due to their location, they are rarely designed as separate buildings. They are usually planned (separated) as zones in larger offices and service facilities, as in the case of Baltica Wellness & Spa in Szczecin¹¹. Biological regeneration centres in the suburbs or outside the city limits can be enriched with green areas. An example is the Vabali Spa complex located in Berlin's Fritz-Schloß-Park, which offers numerous treatments and wet and steam baths (Vabali spa n.d.). There has also been an increase in spa facilities outside urbanized areas, primarily in forests¹². Sometimes, in particularly dif-

ficult-to-access places, a complementary function is located in comfortable and luxurious campsites, commonly called glamping¹³. Situating such functions in places close to the natural environment is closely related to the spa and wellness culture that draws from nature.

In summary, the spa function is located as a complementary (accompanying) function in large service facilities or independently located in medium-sized facilities (as a compact form). It often occurs as a group of low buildings (as a fragmented form) with external spaces, as in the case of Vabali Spa. The spa facility primarily contains spaces for performing numerous specialist treatments, often including saunas and swimming pools. Such facilities should be designed to maintain maximum intimacy for its users, who most often move around naked. It is recommended to use soft lighting and natural materials in the interior. The design avoids the creation of large, high-ceilinged spaces. Instead, it emphasizes the use of intimate areas defined by numerous partitions. When the facility is situated in a naturally attractive setting, window glazing is strategically used to frame valuable views. However, it is important to limit the number of glazed surfaces to prevent excessive exposure of the interior.

Saunas

The spas mentioned earlier are very popular, much like saunas, which scientists have extensively studied for their health benefits in recent decades (Hussain, Cohen 2018). The positive effects of sauna bathing on health have contributed to its widespread popularity. Most independent sauna facilities are found in northern Europe, notably Finland, the birthplace of sauna culture (Kryniewski n.d.). These facilities are typically situated in rural areas like forests or along the shores of lakes and seas, although some can

¹¹ The building also houses the residence functions – Radisson Blu Hotel and recreational functions – Fitness World gyms. This is an example of the location of three independent services, the specificity of which guarantees the cooperation of the owners and mutual financial benefit.

¹² An example of such a facility is Camp SPA in Włodów. Its offer includes, among other things, bathing in a tub, herbal massages, and

a sauna. All treatments take place in the surroundings of wild nature. Due to the spa's specificity, it is open seasonally, from May to September (Moniq music travel 2020).

¹³ The term *glamping* is a combination of two words in English: *glamorous* and *camping*. It is a place intended for camping, where temporary accommodation facilities are located, such as: a summer house, a tent, a tree house. Inside such a facility, there are usually bathrooms, kitchenettes and full furniture equipment (bed, armchair, desk, etc.), thanks to which the stay in such a place is definitely more comfortable than at a classic campsite (Horwat 2018).

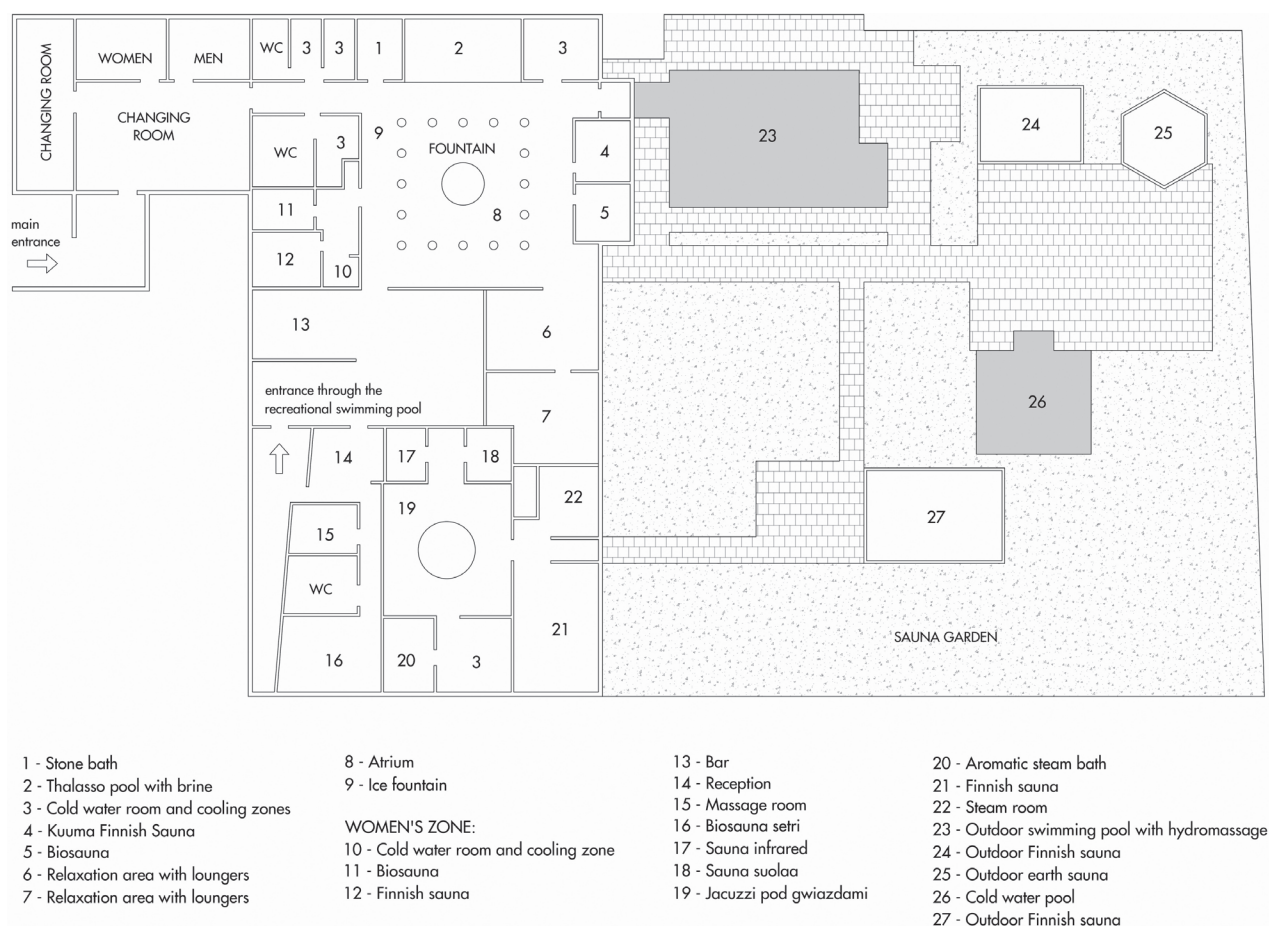


Fig. 3. Plan of the Saunarium in Wrocław (elaborated by J. Gronostajska-Kadecka)

Il. 3. Rzut saunarium we Wrocławiu (oprac. J. Gronostajska-Kadecka)

ing rooms are more extensive than in facilities that house the functions of independent spa centers and spa buildings. For this reason, the volume of the building that houses the function of thermal pools is defined as medium or large (in comparison to the other facilities from the studied subgroups).

Baths

Facilities that share a similar functional program to thermal baths – comprising a complex of swimming pools, saunas, and wellness centers – but do not utilize hot spring waters are referred to as baths. They are usually designed as one compact medium or large building, with possible outdoor areas. These establishments are often located in urban areas, cities, or regions with significant landscape and tourist appeal where thermal water sources are unavailable. Modern baths are designed to echo the style and purpose of ancient baths. A good example of such a design is the saunarium in Wrocław¹⁵.

¹⁵ The sauna is located in the city water park building, where sports pools and recreational pools were designed in addition to the aforementioned function. All zones are interconnected, but tickets for each service must be purchased separately to use them. The user also has the option of using only one selected zone because each has a separate independent entrance, changing room, and sanitary complex.

The Wrocław saunarium encompasses two expansive zones: indoor and outdoor (Fig. 3). The facility features ten types of saunas, a saltwater pool, a jacuzzi, a massage room, and a special area dedicated exclusively for women. Additionally, a coeducational changing room complex includes separate rooms for women and men, along with sanitary facilities equipped with toilets and showers. The design also incorporates an independent catering section, structured as a self-service bar, and two relaxation rooms that effectively divide the sauna area into two functional parts. This layout creates a central communication system and facilitates access to the outdoor space. In the central areas of both sections, a fountain and an internal jacuzzi have been included, surrounded by sauna cabins and cooling zones equipped with showers. The sauna garden features two pools with cold and warm water, three saunas, and a relaxing area with portable loungers (Aquapark Wrocław n.d.).

Spa and wellness hotels

The main architectural feature that distinguishes spa and wellness hotels from other facilities in the hotel industry is an additional recreational section, which houses the above-mentioned functions. Usually, the scope, structure and size of the recreational section determine the functional layout of the other zones within the complex. Therefore,

Table 1. Comparison table for subgroups or complexes of facilities in spa and wellness architecture (elaborated by J. Gronostajska-Kadecka)
Tabela 1. Charakterystyka podgrup lub zespołów obiektów architektury spa i wellness (oprac. J. Gronostajska-Kadecka)

	Spas	Saunas	Thermal baths	Baths	Spa and wellness hotels
Form	compact/fragmented	compact/fragmented	compact/fragmented	compact/fragmented	compact/fragmented
Function (in order of importance)	treatment, saunas, swimming pools	saunas	thermal water pools, saunas, treatment rooms	swimming pools, saunas	hotel, treatment rooms, swimming pools, saunas
Volume*	small/medium	small/medium	medium/large	large	medium/large

* Compared to the remaining facilities from the studied subgroups.

the design process typically begins with a detailed definition of services offered in this recreational area, which can sometimes be as extensive as the accommodation and catering sections (Brzaković, Nikolić and Milojković 2022). Since no detailed definitions of spa and wellness exist and the literature does not define the division between these two concepts, the hotel industry does not precisely assign recreational services to either term. Moreover, the literature contains proposals for classifying wellness services both to the term wellness (Błądek, Błądek and Manikowski 2013) and to the term spa (Słownik języka polskiego PWN 2022b). Nevertheless, it is noted that the spa zone program includes beauty treatments, mainly using water, and the wellness zone plan is closely related to improving well-being and vitality. The formation of a wellness team is closely related to trends in treatments (preventive, beautifying, and relaxing), technological progress, and discoveries in medicine. In addition, the spa and wellness offer, in the case of large hotel facilities, can go beyond the building and be implemented in the form of saunas, swimming pools, and outdoor bathing areas.

The discussed enterprises often include additional recreational spaces related to sports and entertainment to enhance the guest experience. Increasingly, these facilities are designed to meet all customers' needs, covering everything from accommodation and dining to entertainment options. Most commonly, outdoor recreational complexes are developed, featuring amenities such as tennis courts, mini-golf, walking and cycling paths, multi-purpose sports fields, and playgrounds (Błądek, Błądek and Manikowski 2013). In some cases, guests may spend their entire stay within the hotel premises without the need to leave.

In connection with the previous discussion, it is important to note that when a hotel's offerings are sufficiently compelling, its location may become a secondary consideration. However, this assumption has not been universally applicable in the context of Poland. Spa and wellness hotels have their roots in sanatoriums and are often situated in health resorts and popular tourist destinations. While each facility benefits from a scenic location, many of these hotels are being constructed in areas rich in cultural and natural attractions, which do not necessarily have high tourist traffic. Interestingly, introducing a new investment can elevate a location's status, resulting in a sudden influx of tourists. A notable example of this can be found in the Swiss village of Vals, where thermal baths designed by Peter Zumthor

were opened in 1996¹⁶ (Zumthor 2007). Prior to this, the village had experienced a decline in tourism, with a number of outdated hotels dating back to the 1960s. However, following the successful launch of the thermal baths, Vals underwent a significant revival in tourist interest – a trend that continues to this day (Architektura Info 2009).

Conclusions

The article defines spa and wellness architecture based on available scientific and popular literature, making it universally applicable within the architectural industry. This definition may also serve as a step towards establishing standards for spa and wellness facilities, which often encompass intricate structures and combine health, recreational, and accommodation services, among other features. The second part of the work explores various solutions related to the culture of treatment and recreation using water, which has gained popularity in contemporary architecture. The author has identified five main categories of architectural facilities:

1. Spas as independent wellness centers.
2. Saunas as standalone facilities for steam and air baths.
3. Thermal baths as complexes featuring thermal water pools.
4. Baths as complexes that include pools and saunas for water, steam, and air baths.
5. Spa and wellness hotels.

The spatial and functional programs of these categories are determined by the types of treatments and relaxation practices offered at each facility. Each type – saunas, thermal baths, and spa centers – has its unique design approach. Notably, spa and wellness hotels stand out because they integrate complementary services, which is economically beneficial. These hotels meet the needs of today's travelers and adapt to the changing market for tourism and business services. Moreover, the market for these services is highly competitive. The table (Table 1) presents the five subgroups identified in the study, focusing on three specific features

¹⁶ The Zumthor Thermal Baths, the five-star hotel, and the House of Architects accommodation facility form a complex called 7132 Thermal Baths. The above facilities are defined ambiguously because the thermal baths building was added later and currently functions independently of the hotel. Because of this, it is not easy to classify the above complex as a spa and wellness hotel.

related to these facilities: form, function, and volume. It can be noticed that as the complexity of the functional program increases, particularly when it includes technologically advanced elements like swimming pools and thermal pools, the volume of the facilities tends to be larger. The forms of all studied facilities are designed to be compact and frag-

mented. However, it is noted that thermal baths and bath subgroups more frequently utilize a compact structure. Consequently, spa and wellness zones serve as excellent examples for analyzing contemporary architectural solutions, including their functional and spatial aspects and current design trends.

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Streszczenie

Architektura spa i wellness: definicja i konceptualizacja

W ostatnich latach popyt na usługi związane ze zdrowiem i dobrym samopoczuciem znacznie wzrósł, głównie z powodu pandemii SARS-CoV-2. Ta zmiana preferencji społecznych wpłynęła na różne branże, w tym architekturę. W ciągu ostatniej dekady zauważalnie wzrosła liczba budynków zaprojektowanych w celu oferowania usług prozdrowotnych. Zamierzeniem autorki artykułu było zdefiniowanie i uszczegółowienie terminu architektura spa i wellness, który pomimo częstego występowania w piśmiennictwie popularnonaukowym i naukowym, nie został odpowiednio zbadany. W celu zdefiniowania pojęcia omówiła ona oddzielnie definicję terminu architektura oraz terminów spa i wellness, a następnie dokonała ich syntezy. Wynikiem prac jest definicja architektury spa i wellness oraz klasyfikacja, w której wyróżniono pięć grup obiektów współczesnych: spa, sauny, termy, łaźnie, hotele spa i wellness. Sformułowana definicja jest oparta na dostępnej literaturze naukowej i popularnych źródłach. Programy przestrzenne i funkcjonalne wyodrębnionych kategorii obiektów są z kolei określane przez rodzaje zabiegów i praktyk relaksacyjnych oferowanych w każdym obiekcie.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, spa, wellness, usługi zdrowotne