Āgenskalna Priedes Housing District

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Abstract. **Urban history of the first land architecture of the first large-scale housing district in Riga „Āgenskalna priedes" is examined and systematized in the article. This housing is executed in two stages. During the second stage prefabricated large-panel residential buildings of Series 464 were used, introducing the general industrialization of construction.**

Keywords: housing, the modern movement, urban planning.

Āgenskalna Priedes or Pine-trees of Āgenskalns is the first large-scale residential district in Riga. It was built in two stages between 1958 and 1962. It was the time marked by radical changes in architectural style, mass-building technology and urban planning: "socialist realism" prevailing in the Soviet realm was replaced with a simple and rational style in architecture that to some extent may be compared to Modern Movement, assembly of large prefabricated concrete elements replaced traditional construction methods and construction became more extensive covering larger territories with standard buildings. Thus, this district became a herald of a whole new era in architecture and urban planning.

After World War II the gradually fading echoes of the pre-war Neo-eclecticism that derived from classical architecture still prevailed in the world. In the Soviet Union and in all its occupied territories, this retrospective trend was maintained by means of strict ideological dictates. Official slogans preordained art, and architecture as well, to be "socialist in content and national in form". This so-called style of socialist realism "relied on the principles of the party, moral substance and nationalism and adhered to the traditions of realistic art of the past in its creative method" [1]. The mission attributed to art was to inspire masses of working people to new heroic deeds at work. Architectural finishes of buildings exploited various elements of classical vocabulary, sometimes including some symbol of communist ideology, like a five-pointed star or the hammer and sickle, in column capitals.

Yet "socialist realism" in architecture, sometimes also referred to as Stalin's Baroque, was proclaimed to be "excesses" that should be eliminated, replacing contrived and expensive decorative ornaments with simple forms that were naturally related to their function. In this regard, in 1955, the Soviet government passed a decree Measures for the Further Industrialization, Quality Improvement and Cost Reduction of Construction. While at a special meeting, which had to be attended by all architects of the Soviet Union, it was announced that in future the main focus in architecture should be placed on "solution of the major social, technical and ideological challenges, based on comprehensive development of industrial methods of mass construction" [2].

Architectural finish was not completed of many buildings constructed in the mid-1950s, e.g. columns lacked capitals, and it was permitted to construct new buildings to the so-called individual designs only in special cases, e.g. when the house was intended for high-ranking members of the Communist Party. Ordinary residential buildings had to be constructed to standard designs. The most common standard design was the one sent from Moscow for Series 316, i.e. a five-storey section-type residential house. As a rule, these houses were built of white silicate bricks using red bricks along the sides of window openings or between several window openings.

Standard designs could not be used in historic urban environment with the existing buildings, therefore mostly vacant, unoccupied areas were selected for new developments. And there were many such areas on the outskirts of Riga. Thus, the site selected for the first large-scale housing estate was in Āgenskalns – a hilly area in Pārdaugava overgrown with sparse pine-trees bordering on Kristapa, Dreiliņu, Āgenskalna and Alises Streets. This site was intersected by Melnsila Street which bent around the so-called "Big Hill" – a dune raising more than 15 meters high in the central part of the territory. On the opposite side of Melnsila Street there was a lower dune or "the Little Hill'. Behind it, in the gully, there was a small natural pond.

This area or Āgenskalna Priedes had been favoured as a recreational site by inhabitants of Riga since the late 19th century, especially in snowy winters when people were sledging down "the Big Hill" and skiing. There even was a toboggan track that was managed by Āgenskalns Riflemen Society (*Der Hagensberger Schützergesellschaft*) at the beginning of the 20th century [3]. It also collected fees from visitors for winter fun rides. In the period between the wars all the territory of Āgenskalna Priedes district was a freely accessible public area and such it remained also after World War II. The author of this article himself well remembers these days when as a small boy he used to go there to enjoy an hour or two skiing, and later walked every day through this district to Riga Secondary School No 5 (now Riga State Gymnasium of German) that he finished in 1961. Thus, the author saw and experienced firsthand all the changes affecting this area in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Fig. 1. Riga State Gymnasium II. 1931. I. Blankenburgs.

Fig. 2. The water tower in Āgenskalns. 1910. W. Bockslaff. Raised in 1939. P. Pāvulāns.

Fig. 3. Āgenskalna Priedes. An aerial photo taken in the 1930s. In the centre – "the Big Hill" with a toboggan track.

Fig. 4. The district of Āgenskalna Priedes in 1939 Riga Development Plan. [4]

Fig. 5. The corner of Melnsila and Āgenskalna Streets. On the right – a row of birches marking the direction of the old street.

The present-day building of Riga State Gymnasium of German, located at Āgenskalna iela 21a, was built to the design by architect Indriķis Blankenburgs in 1931 as Riga State Gymnasium II. This red brick building is an excellent example of regional interpretation of Modern Movement (Figure 1). Another impressive structure rises on the opposite south-eastern side of the district – the water tower of Āgenskalns, which was built in 1910 (architect Wilhelm Bockslaff) and raised by 7.5 m in 1939 (engineer Pāvils Pāvulāns, Figure 2).

In the late 1950s it was decided to develop the district of Āgenskalna Priedes as a sports and recreation area. The construction of a stadium including a full-size football pitch and a 400-meter running track around it began in the spring of 1958 at the foot of "the Big Hill" in the north-eastern part of the territory, which was less overgrown by trees. A foundation pit was dug nearby for construction of a sports hall. However, the cinder track of the stadium was not completed and during PE classes it was used for short-distance running. Construction of sports facilities soon stopped, while all energy was devoted to the development of the residential district. It began with the razing of "the Big Hill". Previously, walking to school from Kalnciema Street toward Āgenskalna Street, this high dune picturesquely completed the

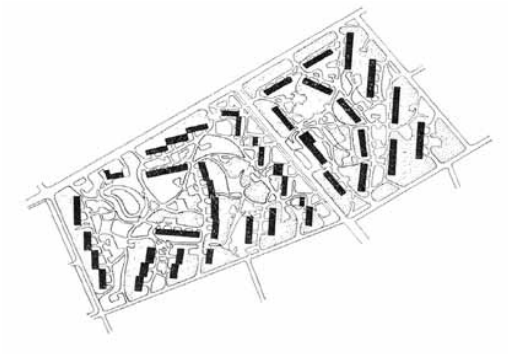

Fig. 6. Āgenskalna Priedes. A layout scheme. 1958. N. Rendelis.

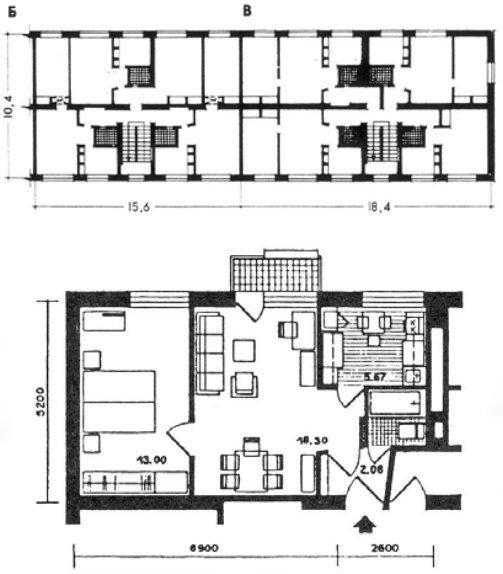

Fig. 7. A layout of sections of Series 316 residential building and a two-room flat.

perspective view (Figures 2 and 3). It was dug up right through the middle and a new straight stretch of Melnsila Street was created. A row of birches on the corner of Melnsila and Āgenskalna Streets still mark the location of the old street section (Figure 5).

In the summer of 1959, steep walls of sand still rose on both sides of the new Melnsila Street. The remains of the hill were gradually razed, sand was transported to a silicate brick factory, and "the Big Hill" was only a memory. "The Little Hill" in the south-western part of the territory was also levelled and the first residential buildings of the new district started appearing there.

The layout design was developed by the architect Nikolajs Rendelis in 1958 (Figure 6). Most of the buildings are located freely along the perimeter of the block obliquely facing the street axes. At that time this layout principle was widely used; apparently it had to show insolation and other sanitary and hygienic advantages of the buildings in comparison with the tight pattern of traditional perimeter blocks. In the district of Āgenskalna Priedes this layout principle also allowed placing almost all buildings meridionally ensuring insolation of those flats, where all windows were located only on one side.

Standard buildings of Series 316 were used in the first construction stage that was completed in 1961. This standard

Fig. 8. Āgenskalna Priedes. Buildings of Series 316 with artists' studios. A view from SW. 1961. [5]

Fig. 9. Āgenskalna Priedes. Buildings of Series 316 with artists' studios. A photo taken in 2012.

design was adjusted for the district of Āgenskalna Priedes by architects Artūrs Reinfelds, Lidija Plakane, Lidija Ose, Regīna Jaunušāne, Ivars Bumbieris, Imants Jākobsons and Modris Ģelzis. Shops and other public service establishments have been attached to four buildings along Melnsila Street.

Residential buildings mostly have one-room or two-room flats. The area of combined toilet and bathroom facilities slightly exceeds 2m^2. In order to achieve high economical efficiency, halls in the flats are also small. They were measured using a made-up coefficient k_2 that expressed the proportion of the floor-space of living rooms to the total area of the flat. This coefficient had to be as close to one as possible. It also accounts for the awkward kitchen solution in these flats since the area in front of the kitchen door was included in the floor-space of the living room (Figure 7).

Fig. 10. Āgenskalna Priedes. Buildings of Series 316 with artists' studios. A photo taken in 2012.

Fig. 11. Āgenskalna Priedes. Buildings of Series 316 with artists' studios. A view from the east. A photo taken in 2012.

Fig. 12. Āgenskalna Priedes. Corridor-type buildings and a group of pine-trees at Kristapa Street.

Fig. 13. The reservoir at the café in Āgenskalna Street. A photo taken in 1964. [6]

Corridor-type four-storey buildings are lining up Kristapa Street, yet their architectural image cannot be distinguished from the buildings of Series 316. During the first construction stage, in the middle of the block there was also constructed a longer building consisting of four five-storey houses of two sections of Series 316 linked together in a semicircle. Artists' studios were arranged above the two central houses, thus endowing a rather monotonous architectural environment with some distinguishing features (Figures 8, 9 and 11). The same solution was later reapplied to other places in Riga. A single pine-tree has survived in the big yard to the west of the buildings with artists' studios (Figure 10). In the autumn of 2011, when the meeting of the representatives of DOCOMOMO Nordic-Baltic regional group was held in Riga, its participants found here one of the last cones. Other pine-trees in this yard have withered away and have been replaced by a thicket of deciduous underbrush. Still some pine-trees can be seen in the southern corner of the block opposite the corner of Kristapa and Dreiliņu Streets where a new copse of pine-trees is growing (Figure 12).

The environment does not create a pleasant atmosphere. A spacious reservoir at the newly built café in Āgenskalna Street was one of the most interesting decorative elements (Figure 13). It was created in the place where once a natural pond was located.

Fig. 14. The playground built instead of the reservoir in 2012.

Fig. 16. Āgenskalna Priedes. The 2nd construction stage. Residential buildings of Series 464 in Alīses Street.

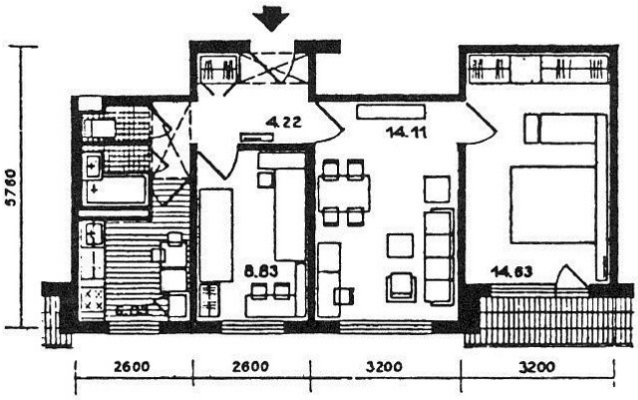

Fig. 15. A three-room flat in a Series 464-A residential house.

Fig. 17. Residential buildings of Series 464 in Alīses Street.

However, this reservoir proved to be dangerous because it was almost impossible to get out of water on one's own climbing up the steep concrete walls of the reservoir, especially for children, if they had accidentally fallen in. Therefore it was necessary to fill the reservoir and a playground was built instead (Figure 14). There are also a few simpler children's playgrounds.

At the end of 1961, the last remains of "the Big Hill" still retained to the northeast of Melnsila Street were removed. And immediately the second construction stage began. The layout of the district relied on the same principle as in the first stage, except several buildings along Melnsila and Āgenskalna Streets were positioned parallel to street axes. A free-standing building with a restaurant and shops rose up on the roadside in the middle of Melnsila Street. Later it was rebuilt several times.

During the second construction stage prefabricated large-panel residential buildings of Series 464 were used. Previously several such buildings were erected in various places in Riga for the sake of experiment, yet in Āgenskalns industrial construction methods on a massive scale were used for the first time. The assembly of all buildings was completed in 1962.

Auxiliary rooms in Series 464 buildings were slightly more convenient than in Series 316, which later acquired a nickname Khrushchevkas, yet the width of walls of some living rooms reached only 2.8 m (Figure 15). Such rooms provided only enough space for meandering between the furniture. Also the quality of prefabricated building elements used in the Āgenskalns district was rather low. Joints connecting the panels were inaccurate and filled with primitive materials. Façades had to be painted, but the paint did not stay long on the surface of concrete panels. After completion of the Āgenskalns district when new large-scale residential areas were constructed in Riga, the buildings of this series had an improved layout, and the finish of exterior walls was already made in the factory.

The quality of neighbourhood created during the second construction stage does not differ from the previous development. Inner courtyard includes some elements of a children's playground. Roads within the block are so narrow that cars can barely pass each other without mounting the kerbs. It is true that the ideological dictate of that period regarded private property, including personal cars, as an obstacle for reaching the promised land of communism. However, the striving to be as economical as possible actually devalued the basic quality requirements for the living environment. Now the roadsides and in some places even the lawns have been damaged by cars. The architectural framework of the neighbourhood is repetitive and monotonous (Figures 16–19). In fact, some scattered deciduous trees are the only form of greenery.

Fig. 18 and 19. Āgenskalna Priedes. The 2nd construction stage. Residential buildings of Series 464 in Kristapa Street and in a crescent around the inner courtyard.

The enthusiasm over sunny and healthy living conditions in the new housing estates spurred by the political ideology gradually abated. Nevertheless thirty-five (!) photos out of about 270 included in the photo album *Riga* [7] that was published in 1981 show the new large-scale housing estates. During the Soviet period, all publications were strictly censored, and the content of such an album also had to reflect the bright future where everybody lived in new and well-furnished apartments. Yet the public opinion and aesthetic ideals are developing regardless of the political dictate, and in a similar album published at the outset of the Soviet collapse [8] only two pictures can be found diffidently depicting large-scale housing estates.

Today the district of Āgenskalna Priedes is an existing urban reality. If we leave aside nostalgia for unique and popular elements of nature that once existed there amid a relatively dense built-up environment, this particular reality should be evaluated comparing it to the subsequently built, much larger housing complexes. From this point of view, Āgenskalna Priedes is one of the best examples of good neighbourhood infrastructure since most of large-scale housing estates constructed during the Soviet period chronically lack public service objects. Today a section of Melnsila Street between Kristapa and Āgenskalna Streets is a quite lively public open space with convenient public transport, shops and other reasonably well functioning public spaces. In any case, the district of Āgenskalna Priedes is a cultural and historical monument in its own right.

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