

A Culture House – a Nucleus of a Collective Farm of Soviet Latvia

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ABSTRACT: The aim of the study is to identify and assess the aesthetic quality of culture houses constructed during the Soviet period in the countryside of Latvia and determine their significance for the architectural heritage of Latvia. This article analyses two distinctly different periods in cultural development of rural areas and construction of culture houses. The first period covers the time span from 1955 till 1975, when standard designs of culture houses were used in architecture. The second period refers to the time between 1975 and 1990, when public opinion drastically changed and a search for national identity renewed. It was the time when the number of individual designs considerably increased.

KEYWORDS: architecture, cultural heritage, history, soviet legacy.

For more than 150 years culture houses have taken a prominent place in urban development and cultural landscape of the countryside of Latvia. They are not only an important part of cultural heritage, but also a key to the existence of Latvian nation and Latvian traditions, national spirit and values. The controversial attitude to this part of cultural heritage of Latvia has been a good incentive for a profound analysis of culture houses.

The Soviet regime changed the lifestyle of people both in the cities and in the countryside. It transformed the traditional rural cultural landscape attempting to eradicate a lifelong tradition of living on farmsteads substituting it with villages of collective farms. The imposed changes, however, could not change an inherent need of people to maintain their ancestral traditions. In the centres of newly established collective farms of Soviet Latvia several cultural establishments were built, i.e. schools, culture houses, open-air stages etc.

The aim of the study is to identify and assess the aesthetic quality of culture houses of the countryside and determine their place in the architectural heritage of Latvia. Two tasks have been set to achieve this aim:

1. to ascertain and analyse types of buildings of culture houses and follow the evolution of their stylistic and aesthetic principles;
2. to compare and evaluate general development of culture houses and determine the possible sources of influence and analogies.

Two distinctly different periods in development of rural cultural environment and construction of culture houses have been analysed. The first period lasted from 1955 till 1975, when standard designs were used. The second period refers to the time between 1975 and 1990, when public opinion drastically changed and a search for national identity renewed.

Today several outstanding problems related to the culture houses of Latvia can be highlighted:

1. administrative centres in Latvia, where culture houses operated, have been eliminated as a result of a rapid

- decrease in population and administrative reforms. The financing for their maintenance was also significantly cut;
2. the uneven development and different financing mechanisms constitute a threat for depletion and destruction of cultural heritage. Developing housing estates, no analysis has been performed as to the location of cultural establishments. No basic principles for incorporation of the existing cultural establishments into the network of new administrative regions have been defined;
 3. samples of high quality building layouts, façade finish and interior designs are lost because of insufficient funding, lack of public awareness and poor quality of building repair and renovation works. It all contributes to depletion of cultural heritage.



Fig. 1. Balvi culture house at Brīvības iela 61. 1954.



Fig. 2. Kārsava culture house at Vienības iela 49C. 1959.



Fig. 3. Preiļi culture house at Raiņa bulvāris 28. 1958. [4]

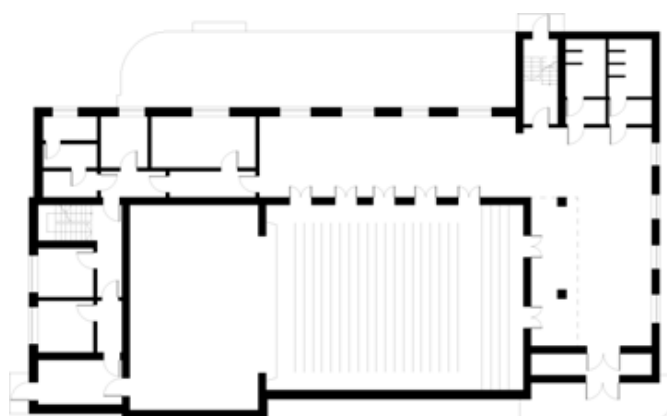


Fig. 5. A standard design for a culture house with 400 and 600 seats. Architects P. Švābe and E. Leitāne. 1959. A drawing by A. Eniņa.



Fig. 4. Krustpils culture house in Jēkabpils at Rīgas iela 210/212. 1954–1959. [5]



Fig. 6. Dagda culture house. Architects P. Švābe and E. Leitāne. 1959.

The methodological principles of the research are based on the architectural analysis of culture houses and summarisation, systematisation and classification of architectural and historical information about the buildings of cultural and educational establishments. A series of unpublished sources and archival materials has been explored and a method of monographic and historical approach has been employed. The buildings of cultural and educational establishments have been ascertained, inspected and photographed, and a visually comparative analysis has been made.

I. RURAL CULTURE HOUSES BETWEEN 1955 AND 1975

In 1940, immediately after the occupation of Latvia and annexation by the Soviet Union the land reform was initiated. As a result, large farms privately owning over 30 hectares of land were eliminated in the rural areas of Latvia. Initially, the expropriated land properties were divided among smaller farms and landless peasants. Over a period of ten years all Latvian farmers had to join collective farms or kolkhozes (abbreviated from Russian – *коллективное хозяйство* i.e. a collective farm [1]). Establishment of collective farms and collectivisation of properties meant a radical change in vernacular land management traditions, yet already in the mid-1950s, recovering from war,

the first culture houses were built in towns and collective farm villages in Latvia.

One standard design was used to build **the culture house in Balvi** at Brīvības iela 61 in 1954 (Figure 1), **the culture house in Preiļi** at Raiņa bulvāris 28 in 1958 (Figure 3) and **the culture house in Krāslava** at Vienības iela 49C in 1959 (Figure 2). These buildings contain spacious rooms with the total area of 1700 square meters. The large assembly hall with 450 seats is encircled by administrative offices and auxiliary rooms. These buildings also include the small hall with 70 seats and rooms for amateur groups. The portico of the great order dominates the main façade. Fenestration has an even pattern regardless of the size of interior spaces. Details of architectural finish are bulky, and they are supplemented either by massive cornices or intermediate cornices. This architectural style is called “socialist realism” [2] or retrospectivism [3].

The shapes of the community centers built in the 1950s are mostly robust and pretentious. In fact, the architecture of these buildings still strongly relied on neo-eclectic features introduced in the last years before the war, which embodied the idea of “the cult of the leader”.

This retrospective trend is also reflected in the architecture of **Baloži culture house** at Skolas iela 4 (built in 1961) and



Fig. 7. A standard design for a culture house with an assembly hall with 450 seats and a cinema hall with 245 seats. Architect A. Titmane. 1959. A drawing by A. Eniņa.



Fig. 8. Kauguri culture house. 1989.

Krustpils culture house in Jēkabpils, Rīgas iela 210/212 (built in 1954–1959). The main façade of Krustpils culture house resembles a grand portal. Above it a fine cornice runs, which also encircles both wings of the building (Figure 4). The luxurious interior design also displays monumental decorative elements and free improvisation with the elements of orders which is characteristic of this period and its striving for ostentatious luxury what had to imply the rightness of the regime. There is a certain degree of incongruity between the use of antique forms in the finish of the buildings and their modern spatial structure, constructions, as well as technical facilities.

In the late 1950s, when construction of large-scale residential districts began in the cities of Latvia using pre-fabricated building constructions [2], the same degree of industrialisation was also applied to the architecture of public buildings. Several new standard designs for culture houses were developed. They were used both in the largest cities of Latvia and in the small centres of collective farms. In 1962, **the culture house of the fishermen's collective farm "Banga"** was opened in Roja, at Zvejnieku iela 5. Its architecture marked a transition from a separate use of one standard design and its widespread use in construction of culture houses.



Fig. 9. The culture house "Enerģētīķis" in Salaspils district. 1980.



Fig. 10. Architect Tīkmanis working on his diploma design "A Tourist Centre at Lake Kaķīši". On the left – his fellow student Uldis Pabērzs. 1968. [12]

A culture house with 400 or 600 seats (architects P. Švābe and E. Leitāne, 1959) was one of the first standard designs widely used in Soviet Latvia [6]. Such culture houses were built in Dagda, Zilupe, Ventspils, Ludza and other towns. The volumes of an assembly hall and a foyer are arranged freely and asymmetrically, placing the main entrance next to the end wall of the hall. In Dagda, Zilupe and Ludza the buildings are retracted from the street lines providing enough space around them (Figures 5 and 6). On the other hand, in Ventspils, the culture house was squeezed within a dense perimeter block. The culture house has an inappropriate scale and it is too bulky for the environment. Evident is a refusal to use any decorative elements both in the façades and interiors. No relation can be seen to the architectural traditions of asymmetric free-standing buildings of people's houses – as regards composition of volumes, understanding of scale, and spatial qualities – built in the pre-war period in towns and small cities.

Quite often in smaller collective farms a culture house with 400 seats for spectators turned out to be too large. Therefore a new standard design was developed for culture houses with the total area of about 1000 square meters. This two-storey rectangular structure of these buildings has a four-sided roof. Windows in the façades are arranged in an even rhythmical pattern.



Fig. 11. The standard design for the culture house in the collective farm “Lenin” in Kocēni, Valmiera region and in the collective farm “Zelta druva” in Dobeles region. A model. Architect L. Tikmanis. 1968–1976. [12]



Fig. 12. Mālpils culture house with 600 seats. 1975–1988. [12]



Fig. 13. Mālpils culture house with 600 seats. 1975–1988. [12]



Fig. 14. Mālpils culture house with 600 seats. In the foreground, the architect E. L. Tikmanis. Around 1988. [12]

These houses largely resemble residential buildings and do not appear imposing. This design was used to build culture houses in Alsviķi, Aglona, Biksti, Mērsrags etc.

In the countryside and towns of Latvia, a standard design for a culture house with **an assembly hall with 450 seats and a cinema hall with 245 seats** was widely used (architect A. Tītmane, 1959). Both halls are connected via a gallery with the rooms for amateur clubs located above it on the top floors (Figure 7). For example, this design was used for the culture houses in Ilūkste district, Sigulda, Smiltene etc. A mirror image of the building layout was also used e.g. in the culture house in Skrunda. The façade finish displays minor variations due to different finishing techniques used, thus the culture house of Daugavpils Vorstadt at Vidzemes iela 41 has pointed, unplastered brick walls, while painted plaster has been used for the façades of the culture house in Gulbene. Mass construction of culture houses and the dominant ideology precluded the use of more refined architectural and artistic means of expression in the architecture of those buildings. The visual image of the people's houses built between 1955 and 1975 lack distinctive aesthetic qualities. A special attention should be paid to the quality of the public open spaces surrounding the people's houses. It is necessary to explain the ideological role of monumental and decorative arts, the importance of decorative

sculptures in organisation of external and internal spaces and the need for outdoor small architectural forms. Quite often, as a result of conversions carried out today, works of fine arts are lost. Thus, after the façade insulation, the monumental relief depicting a girl in a national costume has disappeared from above the main entrance of the people's house of Dagda district. A special attention should be paid to the problem of architectural regeneration of the people's houses built during the Soviet period in Latvia.

II. RURAL CULTURE HOUSES BETWEEN 1975 AND 1990

After 1975, construction of people's houses continued in Latvia, yet the public opinion changed and it had a direct effect on the visual image of people's houses, their typology, and on their architecture in general. Increasingly more attention was paid to the environment as a whole, what to a certain extent changed the proportion between the use of standard and individual designs in construction of people's houses.

The architecture of people's houses continued to display features and shapes of modern movement deriving from the 1930s. The architecture of **Kauguri culture house** (1989) and **the culture house “Enerģētikiš” of Salaspils district** (1980)



Fig. 15. The club, office and village council in Nīgrande, Saldus region. A model. 1984–1986. [12]



Fig. 16. The office of the collective farm in Renda, Kuldīga district. 1983–1987. [12]

has rather expressive massing of cubic shapes, corresponding tectonics and strongly emphasised entrances (Figures 8 and 9).

A number of designs for the important public buildings of that time were developed at the State Rural Construction Design Institute “Laukuprojekts” of the Ministry of Construction of the Latvian SSR (it was also commonly referred to as “Latgiproseļstroj” using its abbreviation in the Russian language). The design institute “Laukuprojekts” employed some of the renowned architects of Latvia such as Dzintars Driba, Oļģerts Buka and Ēriks Laimonis Tikmanis (Figure 10).

Already in 1968, immediately after graduating, the architect Tikmanis began to develop a standard design for a culture house. Initially, the design was intended for a culture house in **the collective farm “Lenin” in Kocēni, Valmiera district** (Figure 11). The bureaucratic system of the USSR and Soviet Latvia prevented this project from being implemented. Only almost ten years later, after some minor changes were made to the design, the culture house was finally constructed in **the collective farm “Zelta druva” in Dobele district** under the guidance of the architect Aivars Pētersons. The architect noted that it had been a very painful experience for him since the implementation of the project involved so many difficulties [7]. The architecture of the culture house reflects traditions of modern movement. The standard design was adjusted respecting the specific relief of the area. The massing consists of cubic elements creating a dynamic composition. The completion of the culture house of the collective farm “Zelta druva” was an important turning point in the architect’s career. It strongly influenced his further creative achievements.

The design for a model village in Mālpils is one of the most interesting designs for public centres developed by the architect Tikmanis. This project was implemented under his guidance from 1974 till 1985, when the building of the office of the collective farm, the building of the village council and **Mālpils culture house** with 600 seats were constructed (Figures 12–14). The architecture of the building displays features of the international modern movement. The massing consists of cubic elements with rounded corners. Huge planes of glass alternate with rendered wall planes. The building has a harmonious and appealing image and a distinct centre of spatial composition. This manner drawing



Fig. 17. The office of the collective farm in Renda, Kuldīga district. 1983–1987. [12]

on functionalism characterised the initial period of architect’s creative career. Later his creative manner changed acquiring a different stylistic expression.

In the 1970s, the architect developed several designs for club buildings e.g. for **the club in Skujene, Cēsis district** (1977–1978), **the club and office building in Bērzgale, Rēzekne district** (1981–1986), **the club and office building in Laubere, Ogre district** (1983–1987) and **the club with an auditorium for 500 spectators in Rundāni, Ludza district** (1982–1987). These designs show the architect’s inclination to vernacular building traditions and principles of massing and composition. The club and office building in Bērzgale, Rēzekne district is considered to be the last culture house designed by the architect in the vein of modern movement. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, new tendencies coming from the West brought new trends to the architecture. It had also become more urgent than ever to review the designing principles of rural villages. Architect Ģirts Ādmiņš pointed out that “the real beauty of the countryside is not a surrogate of the beauty of the city but a unique phenomenon wide in its essence” [8]. Architect Modrīte Lūse emphasized that rural settlements unlike the city are perceived “viewing them from the outside as a whole” [9]. It became very important to review the designing criteria of a culture house as a depository of national



Fig. 18. The office of the collective farm in Renda, Kuldīga district. Sketches. 1983–1987. [12]



Fig. 19. The people's house in Pušmucova parish. 1989.

values and a landmark of the rural area. An attempt to reproduce the living environment of the city in collective farms was severely criticised [10].

The architecture of **the building of the club, the office and the village council** (1984–1986) designed by architect Tīkmanis in **Nīgrande, Saldus district** shows such an innovative understanding of the values. The office of the collective farm is located next to the school of Nīgrande with its central entrance facing the picturesque valley of the River Venta. It was designed as a hallmark and a contrast to the inappropriate high-rise residential buildings constructed in the village. The layout of the club displays the principle often used in postmodernism, namely, one of the volumes is placed at a 45-degree angle to the others (Figure 15).

Tīkmanis applied the vocabulary of postmodernism also in the conversion project **transforming the former watermill in Pampāļi** for administrative and cultural needs (1982–1987). On the ruins of the watermill destroyed during World War II, retaining the existing stone walls, the rooms were created for larger social gatherings, i.e. two fireplace halls with an area of 170 m² each, 25 hotel rooms, a hairdresser's saloon and a sauna with a swimming pool. The halls had doors leading to the terrace overlooking the water reservoir at the mill and the park [11]. The "hat", which was added to the mill, seems to be inspired by the carnival. A slight carelessness wins over bleak seriousness. An audacious prank overrides traditional stagnation. Postmodernism is intensively imaginative, exotic and unreal.

In the mid-1980s, unity and stability in architects' works were targets of irony. The main keywords of postmodern architecture

could be – fortuity, game, allegory, and self-reflection. Amid the atmosphere saturated in irony in the world architecture as a whole, in the mid-1980s, one of the most successful examples of postmodernism was created in the architecture of Latvia, namely, **the office of the collective farm and the culture house in Renda, Kuldīga district** (1983–1987), which was designed by Tīkmanis [12]. The tree-lined building sits on the bank of the River Ivande, on the side of the road Riga–Kuldīga, where once the outhouse of the former rectory stood. The architect tried to respect the location and scale of the existing buildings in the village. The building comprised an office of the collective farm, an assembly room with 180 seats, halls for social gatherings with a fireplace room and hotel rooms for 10 guests (Figures 16–18). The building has accentuated red tile roof planes, while the red brick cladding of the walls displays elaborate patterns. The lintels above window openings are used as decorative elements. The main entrance boasts certain clichés of postmodernism, which highlight and harmoniously complete the artistic composition.

The culture house in Mālpils, the office and pre-school educational establishment in Renda and other buildings designed by Tīkmanis have added new features to the rural landscape of Latvia. In the 1980s, Tīkmanis spoke about the development problems of rural villages: "each central village presents "an open-air museum" or a design catalogue of all standard post-war building designs" [13]. According to the architect, their further reproduction would lead nowhere. The number of population decreased in rural areas, yet the planning disregarded possibilities for long-term rural development. Today, many rural territories are already degraded. The landscape is distorted by ghastly silhouettes of unfinished buildings that are staring at passers-by with blind windows.

New trends in postmodernism inspired architects not only in Latvia, but all over the world. Postmodernism is often defined as an opposition to the dictate of Soviet ideology. However, postmodernism appeared as a logical consequence after the ideological crisis of modern movement.

In the mid-1980s, the searches for postmodern expressions were also reflected in designs developed by several other architects e.g. for **the people's house in Pušmucova parish** (1989), **the culture house of the collective farm "Jaunais komunārs" in Kalni, Nīgrande parish** (architect A. Īvane, 1987) [14] and **the culture house of the collective farm "Stučka" in Aizkraukle parish** (architect A. Bernharde, 1988). These buildings have characteristic clichés of postmodernism, i.e. low-pitched arches and triangular motifs, rounded corners of the buildings etc. (Figures 19 and 20). The vocabulary of details, the rhythm and the scale appropriate to the milieu of the architecture of these buildings enhance the expressiveness of the surrounding rural scenery. Their architecture presents an open denial of the previously promulgated principles of modesty. [15].

Viesīte culture house (architect L. Skuja, 1983–1992) was built as the administrative centre of the agricultural company "Daugava" (Figure 21). It includes a concert hall, cinema hall, assembly hall, dance hall, town council and library, regional television studio, house management office, police station and other groups of rooms. This building is a true masterpiece of postmodernism. Its architecture, being on the verge of becoming

kitsch, employs a theme of a medieval castle. The entrance resembles a huge medieval gate while the corners of the building boast large fortification towers. Already in the late 1980s, exaggerated imagery and interpretation of forms implied the decline of postmodern architecture. The culture house in Viesīte is a quintessential product of its time. Perhaps, one of the theories of postmodernism can be used for its assessment: “plagiarism does not annoy but rather enriches the postmodern work” [16, 433]. Accentuated use of historical forms very often contradicts the architectural and spatial logic. Postmodernism is sometimes compared to a great feast which has left a feeling of hangover to a certain part of society. Evidently an impartial evaluation of postmodernism is a task for the future.

In fine arts the main feature of postmodernism was fragmentarism. *Cinema* was created that relied heavily upon editing, works of art and posters were made as collages, in music mixing of audio tracks became popular. In architecture, mixing of forms also took place, combining, for example, a circle with a triangle and a cube, a cylinder with angular shapes, curves with straight lines, etc. Yet in architecture as in a monumental art all these attempts were rather formal and artificial.

The philosophy of the 1980s emphasized practical experience. Postmodernism was used as a means for expression of Latvian experience in architecture. The sources of influence can be found in ethnographic archetypes of Latvian architecture, traditions and language. The study of traditions plays an important role in architecture. Historically, the commensurability of farmsteads and the surrounding rural countryside has strongly influenced Latvian scenery. Solitary roofs on the background of sown fields are more characteristic of Latvian identity than straight street lines in the villages of collective farms.

CONCLUSIONS

The buildings of culture houses constructed between 1955 and 1975 did not have a unique image responsive to the *genius loci*. The emotional atmosphere created by architecture over the previous years disappeared. External shapes of community centers became bulky and pretentious. The culture houses built by the end of the 1950s were designed in the style of “socialist realism”. Most of standard community centers built in the 1960s and 1970s do not blend harmoniously within the environment. However, some buildings are distinctive examples of architecture of the particular period.

From 1975 till 1990 public opinion changed and a search for national identity renewed. The number of individual designs considerably increased. Standard designs for culture houses reflect searches for new stylistic and functional solutions. The architecture of culture houses relies on peculiar features characteristic of regional architecture. Society opposed imposition of certain ideology, including politicisation of architecture. The notion “national” was badly degraded. The retrospective perception coincided with the level of development of public opinion. It allowed architects to engage in various improvisations of history, to reinvent eclectic methods using them in an industrialised manner in the architecture of people’s houses. Today, postmodernism – a style that prevailed in the architecture of the 1970s and 1980s – is often described as “views of cultural



Fig. 20. The culture house in Aizkraukle parish. Architect A. Bernharde. 1988.



Fig. 21. The culture house in Viesīte. Architect L. Skuja. 1983–1992.

heritage protection specialists” [15] based on interpretation of historical forms.

At the same time, a pronounced historical aversion to standard architecture had developed. As stated by the architect V. Neilands, “stylistic restrictions lead to standardisation which contradicts the essence of architecture” [15]. Yet the numerous implemented standard designs form an important cultural and historical value.

Philosopher M. Kūle argued that ideas of postmodernism could thrive only in an open society [16]. And Western democracies are one of such societies. The totalitarian system of the Soviet Union prevented the expression of the different views in political, spiritual and social life, and in architecture. The fluctuation of the regime in the 1980s allowed strong artistic impulses to be expressed, since their further development could not be stopped.

Sometimes in the 1980s the works created in Latvian architecture were too stereotyped, while the movement of postmodernism as such is regarded as a positive thing. The major problem of postmodern architecture is the dull interpretation of forms.

Overall, the architecture of culture houses in the territory of Latvia has developed successively. Although so far historical and ideological prejudices have made it difficult to evaluate the architecture of the buildings constructed during the Soviet period, the culture houses of that period have a considerable potential of cultural heritage. Today, we should focus on preservation of national identity and avoid reducing the importance of its function. The culture house needs to preserve the sense of unity, togetherness and camaraderie of the nation.

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