

9

Conditions of Riga

Regeneration and Transformation of the City —
Urban Environment and Architecture



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New Pastoralism

Regeneration of the Image of the Traditional City

In the 1970s and 1980s, various state-owned and public building protection initiatives were developed in Riga, for example, the regeneration plan of Old Riga, which was also partially carried out. Nevertheless, it was only after the Restoration of Independence and the socioeconomic transformation when the restoration of the buildings became more popular and ambitious due to the support of the public sector. In 1997, the Historic Centre of Riga was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Riga is the political, economic and cultural centre of Latvia and a home for more than one-third of the population of the whole country, therefore, it is only natural that the major construction activities take place exactly in Riga. Yet, it is most probably the extensive industrial heritage which has played the uppermost role in the fact that the local architects are involved in different restoration, renovation and reconstruction projects for years.

The proportion of new buildings in Riga is considerably smaller than that of Vilnius and especially Tallinn. After two decades of development, conclusions can be made that the local architects have been able to gain the most experience, skills and mastery exactly in those fields of architecture which are related to the architectural heritage. The most interesting masterpieces include projects in which the old is combined with the new and in which the old charm of the heritage blends in harmony with the contribution of the new architecture.

In the last decades, the architecture of Riga has not been very comprehensive and urban, mostly due to the lack of strong educational traditions and values in the field of urbanism and city planning, nevertheless, as experience and capital increases, more extensive improvement projects of the urban environment are carried out. The first improvement projects were developed by private investors and developers, however, in recent years, Riga City Council has played a major role in supporting such projects.

These projects restore and improve small pre-modernist parts of the city and sharpen up the image of the traditional European city by creating a tranquil atmosphere characteristic to towns rather than cities and therefore offering an almost pastoral paradise – something that is only possible in an urban environment unaffected by modernity.

Two noteworthy examples are the *opus magnum* of the architect Zaiga Gaile – the renovation of Bergs Bazaar and her contribution to the urban environment of Ķīpsala. Her approach is to maintain the historic atmosphere of the old buildings by skillfully merging both the old and the new and adapting the historic architecture to the needs and requirements of functionality and modern lifestyle. Although this approach is preferred neither by the professionals of restoration nor by those who support the principles of the Venice Charter, which states that any new reconstruction and restoration work must be clearly distinguishable from the original, the result is nevertheless a harmonious environment increasingly valued by both the rich and the middle-class. It can be said that such examples as Ķīpsala and the Kalnciema Quarter have managed to restore the confidence of the public in wooden buildings, since now they have become more appreciated and honored.

The financial crisis of 2008 played a paradoxically important role in the rebirth of the urban environment. A large number of luxury shops, glamorous offices and salons were forced to vacate the premises on the first floors of the buildings and since the tenancy fees decreased, they were replaced by different small cafes, outdoor terraces, bakeries, pastry shops and other semi-commercial and even non-commercial institutions.



Kalnciema Street

Pārdaugava

Kalnciema Street is the main traffic road in Pārdaugava district, which acts as a gateway between Riga International Airport, the City Centre and Jūrmala. The spectacular classicism ensemble consisting of wooden houses can be observed on both sides of the street starting from the corner of Slokas Street and heading up to the railway viaduct. The attitude of the society towards the wooden houses and Kalnciema Street as such has gradually changed - mainly because of the effort of some enthusiastic people. Since more than half of these houses are municipal property, some of them state property and the rest – private property, the restoration work is based on public-private partnership. Initially, the restoration was inspired by a state visit of the president of the United States of America in 2005 as well as the NATO summit in the following year. Since Kalnciema Street is the road connecting the City Centre and Riga International Airport, the restoration work was financially supported by the government. Some of the house owners took private finance initiative and started to restore several buildings in 2004. Over the years, six houses have been restored and become the so-called Kalnciems Quarter. Practically these are separate buildings on four plots of land on the corner of Kalnciema Street and Melnsila Street. What makes this place so special are the people bound together by similar values and lifestyles. Different events, such as markets and fairs, are taking place in the courtyard by the street, making Kalnciema Street the epicenter of the social life in the district.