

Soviet-Era Architecture: Valuable or a Burden?

Based on the Example of Collective Farm Centres

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SUMMARY

The administrative-cultural centres of collective farms are an important part of Estonian Soviet built legacy. These buildings are valuable due to their unique external and internal architecture, as well as the social role that they used to play in rural life between the 1960s and the 1990s. However, after the abolition of collective farming at the beginning of the 1990s, the value of the former administrative-cultural centres of collective farms was not taken for granted. Like everything else originating from the Soviet era, the administrative-cultural centres were disapproved of by the public. The difficult socio-economic situation that developed in the countryside after the re-establishment of independence was also a cause for the non-use or poor maintenance of many collective farm office buildings. Since 2007, when the preservation and protection of the architecture of the 20th century gained importance, much more attention has been paid by experts to the Soviet built legacy. Also, the collective farm architecture was more thoroughly researched. Today, three of the administrative-cultural centres are already listed as architectural monuments. Nevertheless, preservation and sustainable reuse of these buildings depend most of all on the owners, as well as the local communities, who are often not aware of the value of the buildings or still perceive them as Soviet-era burdens. Ignorance has caused the destruction or non-authentic reconstruction of several architectural masterpieces, which has finally led to the disappearance of pieces of the past. Therefore, recognition of these Soviet-era buildings as part of Estonian architectural history plays an essential part in their preservation.

Introduction

The administrative-cultural centres of collective farms are an outstanding Soviet time architectural legacy in Estonian rural areas. The heyday of those buildings was in the 1970s and 1980s, when collective farms (kolkhozes and sovhozes)¹ were wealthy and quite influential, and the life in the countryside flourished. However, this ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the abolition of collective farming at the beginning of the 1990s. The period after the re-establishment of the Republic of Estonia did not support the continuation of rural development, which had an impact on the preservation and reuse of the built legacy of collective farms. Today, there are some collective farm centres that have been successfully adopted to new functions but there are also several buildings in quite poor condition. A few former architectural masterpieces have already become ruins.

The present article concentrates on how the changes in the society have affected judgements regarding the value and the preservation of the administrative-cultural centres of collective farms. I analyse whether these buildings of the Soviet era have become Estonian national heritage today or whether they are perceived as burdensome waste in the countryside. Since one can only understand the essence of administrative-cultural centres of collective farms if one is aware of their history and background, I give an overview of the period of collective farming and discuss the aspects that make these buildings valuable. I also examine the issues that have affected their preservation and reuse after the abolition of collective farming. My analysis in this article is based on more thorough research on the administrative-cultural centres of collective farms, which I have been conducting since 2014. I have gathered information via field work, archival studies and several interviews with heritage conservation authorities, experts in the field and residents of the former collective farms.

Collectivisation of agriculture and construction of the administrative-cultural centres of collective farms in Soviet Estonia

Collective farming was forcibly implemented in the annexed Soviet Socialist Republics by the authorities of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1940s. There were two main ideological goals in collectivisation: first, to abolish private ownership in agriculture through the creation of a model based on large-scale collective agricultural production, and second, the Communist Party's ideology of eliminating differences between the country and the city by concentrating rural populations into city-like centralised rural settlements. As in other collectivised countries, in Estonia, where private farming traditions were deeply ingrained, the creation of collective farms was strongly opposed by the farmers. Resistance to collectivisation was also based on information about the miserable lives of the collective farm workers in Soviet Russia, where collectivisation had been implemented in the 1930s.² Therefore, full collectivisation had to be implemented by force, which meant the deportation of thousands of farming families in 1949 to the most distant regions of the USSR. At the end of the 1950s collectivisation in the Soviet Republics was considered complete.

Collective farming brought about massive construction projects in the Estonian countryside since the new agricultural production system and new rural way of life required a novel technical and social infrastructure. The modern rural settlement was supposed to provide a unique model of communal rural life, where the inhabitants lived in city-like blocks of flats, ran their daily errands in public institutions and shops located in the centres of the settlements, and went to work at the nearby collective farms.³ Although the general plan foresaw a small central settlement located in an empty space, in reality all the new settlements developed near already existing villages and towns.⁴ At the end of the 1960s collective farms became quite well-off due to the high demand for agricultural products in the Soviet Russian market. The most intensive period of rural construction was in the 1970s and 1980s, when the collective farms were already quite prosperous, rural living standards developed rapidly, and the construction capacities of collective farms increased. To fulfil the increasing needs and ambitions, collective farms established regional construction organisations, called inter-collective farm construction offices. The inter-collective farm construction offices

belonged to the collective farms and implemented construction projects in the region according to their instructions.⁵ In the 1970s the inter-collective farm construction offices became rather independent, which meant that they built more of what they thought was useful for themselves and less of what the collective farms needed.⁶

Among all the other construction work, collective farms and the inter-collective farm construction offices began to erect administrative buildings for their management. More wealthy collective farms had built administrative buildings at the end of the 1950s, but most were constructed between the 1960s and the 1990s. Not all the collective farms built new buildings for their management; some used already existing farm houses. At the same time, some were able to build two administrative centres over the period of collective farming. The exact number of the administrative-cultural centres is not known. Since there were more than 300 collective farms in Soviet Estonia,⁷ there may have been hundreds of centres.

The administrative-cultural centres were mainly located in the immediate vicinity of the collective farms or in the centres of the rural settlements. While the first administrative-cultural buildings were small and followed the traditional architectural style, the edifices built later became more massive in size and often other functions in addition to administrative were merged into one building. It was difficult to get building permission because of a shortage of building materials, and therefore the new buildings had to satisfy a multitude of functions.⁸ For example, village councils, health care services, post offices, libraries and canteens were combined. The premises were also used for community gatherings and different cultural events: films, theatre performances etc., which is the reason why they were called administrative-cultural centres or office-club buildings of collective farms.

Since the general construction policy of the Soviet Union anticipated standardised construction, a few administrative-cultural buildings of collective farms were built according to standard projects. Nevertheless, the authorities of the collective farms were ambitious to erect distinctive and outstanding administrative-cultural centres to demonstrate the wealth and distinct features of their collective farms. Additionally, the increasing criticism in the late 1960s, when the construction of collective farm settlements was in full swing, that exterior archi-

ecture of the new buildings was tedious, and the new rural settlements all looked alike⁹ strengthened the desire to build unique buildings. As a result, the State Construction Committee of Soviet Estonia declared that the administrative-cultural centres of collective farms could be built according to unique designs to comply with their multi-functionality and to emphasise regional peculiarities.¹⁰ This decision opened up the opportunity for a new generation of Estonian architects to implement their own ideas, which also meant the advent of modernism and later post-modernism in rural architecture. A characteristic feature of post-war modernism in Soviet Estonia was the incorporation of international, especially Nordic, architectural styles and their application creatively in the service of a new type of rural environment.¹¹ One of the avant-garde collective farm offices in Estonia was the administrative building of the Kurtna Experimental Poultry Farm, which was designed by Valve Pormeister and completed in 1966. The novel and 'Western' design of this building was the beginning of fame for the new rural architecture in Soviet Estonia.¹²

Furthermore, the wish of the management of the collective farms to outdo each other resulted

in the creation of extraordinary architecture, with gables, towers and irregular-shaped windows.¹³ For example, the administrative-cultural building of the Laekvere State Farm, designed by Vilen Künnapu and built in 1984–1989, was a peculiar post-modernist building that was artfully matched to the surrounding older building complex. Furthermore, the administrative building of the Rapla Inter-Collective Farm Construction Office, designed by Toomas Rein and built in 1977, is considered one of the most extraordinary Soviet-era administrative buildings today (Fig. 1).¹⁴ This edifice is outstanding due to its octagonal pyramidal shape, surrounding artificial environment and highly suitable interior design elements.

For many administrative-cultural centres not only the exterior design was unique but also the interiors and interior design elements were very well considered and matched the external architecture. Frequently the works of well-known interior design architects and artists were placed in the lobbies and assembly halls of the administrative-cultural centres. This synthesis of the arts, and homogeneous combination of exterior and interior architectural elements was another aspect that made the ad-



Fig. 1: Administrative building of the Rapla Inter-Collective Farm Construction Office, architect Toomas Rein, built in 1977 (2017).

ministrative-cultural centres exceptional. The fact that such unique edifices, which were designed by talented Estonian architects and represented some of the best examples of modernism and post-modernism, were erected in the countryside made them phenomena of rural architecture. Furthermore, due to their social functions, the administrative buildings became popular among the local people and workers of the collective farms; their attractive architecture and design made them icons of regions. The original integral solutions of the collective farm settlements and the prominence of the single buildings crossed even the borders of the Soviet Union and were often mentioned in the Western media.

Developments over time

The 1970s and 1980s, when the living conditions in the countryside were rather good and the rural population was increasing, formed the heyday for the collective farms and their administrative-cultural centres. The re-establishment of the Republic of Estonia in 1991 brought about many new reforms, including the abolition of collective farming, which had a devastating effect on rural life. As a result of the dissolution of cooperative farming, many small individual farms were established, but the free market, ultra-liberal economic model and double tariffs imposed by Russia did not support survival of small farms, and therefore agricultural production concentrated into large farms.¹⁵ Since the number of agricultural jobs decreased sharply, the rural population began to decline rapidly, and the life in the countryside stagnated compared to life in the cities.

Nevertheless, the large built legacy of the collective farms remained, to which a new function had to be found, including the former collective farm administrative-cultural centres. Many of the agricultural production buildings, as well as residential buildings became uneconomical, substandard or too large in the context of the changed rural life and were therefore abandoned. The fate of administrative-cultural buildings of collective farms depended on the wealth and demographic developments of the specific region or village, as well as on the new owners. The ones that remained in public use were usually used as government buildings, libraries or community and cultural centres, which meant that they were maintained or repaired at least minimally. The private owners who had bought former administrative-cultural buildings for business purpose were often unable to find profitable functions



Fig. 2: Administrative-cultural centre of the Tsooru Collective Farm, architect Toomas Rein, completed in 1977 (2018).

or manage such large buildings. Therefore, many privately-owned buildings were abandoned and left to decay. There are still exceptions, for example the post-modernist administrative building of the collective farm *Kalevipoeg*, built in the 1980s, which was converted to a farm house by the owner.

While the socio-economic situation stabilised and improved in the countryside over time, the most remote regions are still suffering from ageing and decreasing populations, which means that the situations of the former architectural icons have worsened over the years. Some buildings that were in quite good condition at the beginning of the new millennium have become rundown since then. There are many administrative-cultural centres in small villages that have been abandoned and, without proper care or as a result of vandalism, have become complete ruins. This is what happened, for instance, to the administrative-cultural centre of the Tsooru Collective Farm, which was designed by Toomas Rein and built in 1977. This building, which used to stand out with its snow-white façades and ribbon windows, was considered one of the best examples of modernist architecture by experts. It was even included on the list of the most valuable Estonian 20th century buildings composed by the Estonian national working group DOCOMOMO in 1997.¹⁶ Because it's been out of use since the mid-1990s, there is not much left of the former architectural masterpiece today (Fig. 2).

The main reasons for the abandonment and negligence of the administrative-cultural buildings of collective farms was their huge size or remote locations in the context of the decreasing rural population. Over the years, the Soviet-era poor building quality, including the extremely low energy efficiency and the poor-quality building materials, also has had a strong effect on the condition of the edifices. However, there was also the general attitude of people, which did not support preservation and regeneration of buildings from the Soviet era.

After the change in the state regime, negative memories from the troubled past were transferred to everything that originated in the Soviet era,¹⁷ including the built legacy. The ideological approach of rejecting and deprecating the socialist heritage can be seen as a consequence of the post-socialist cultural trauma,¹⁸ i.e. the shock following the collapse of socialism that left painful psychological scars on the Estonian consciousness. It was not easy to overcome this shock, and even at the beginning of the new millennium much of the architectural legacy that was left behind after the abolition of the socialist regime was ignored or even despised by many people. This was true of most of the residential and agricultural production buildings of the collective

farms, which can be found abandoned and dilapidated everywhere in the Estonian countryside. Unfortunately, the former administrative-cultural centres that used to be the most appreciated collective farm buildings by the locals were often also seen as representatives of the hated era and therefore ignored by the locals.

Valorisation of administrative-cultural centres as national heritage

The emergence of the acknowledgement of the Soviet-era legacy as national heritage began with the growth of interest among research institutions, specialists and experts in the field. The first two administrative-cultural centres of collective farms were placed on heritage lists in 2001 and 2004: the main building of the Kurtna Experimental Poultry Farm, designed by Valve Pormeister and completed in 1966, and the office building of the Saare Inter-Collective Farm Construction Office, designed by Marika Lõoke and completed in 1982. At the beginning of the millennium, the post-war architecture was broadly recognised as valuable. The breakthrough in the increase in appreciation of Soviet built legacy is considered to have occurred in 2007, when the demolition plan of the former Poli-



Fig. 3: Administrative-cultural centre of the Lümända State Farm, architect Veljo Kaasik, completed in 1986 (2016).

tical Education Building of the Estonian Communist Party, designed by Raine Karp and built in 1985, became public. A campaign against the destruction was initiated by architects and architectural historians; this was soon followed by the protests of citizens' associations, students and the general public.¹⁹ Although the building was demolished, it was the first time that it was admitted by the general public, in addition to specialists, that the architecture of Estonia's recent past was not sufficiently recognised, valued or protected.²⁰ Therefore, the project *Mapping and analysing the Estonian 20th century valuable architecture* was carried out in 2008–2012. The project, undertaken by researchers, focussed on the architecture of the entire 20th century, and thus it involved thorough research of the Soviet period, including collective farm architecture. This research is a good basis for the listing decisions of the National Heritage Board of Estonia now, and based on them the administrative-cultural centre of the Rapla Inter-Collective Farm Construction Office was listed as an architectural monument in 2015. The administrative-cultural building of the Linda Collective Farm, is currently in the listing process.

Valorisation of the collective farm architecture on the national level is just one part of preserving this heritage; no less important is changing the established attitude of the “ordinary” people and local communities. Thus, the attitude of valuing the era over the architecture itself is slow to disappear. In the case of the former administrative-cultural buildings of collective farms, the negative mindset is mostly attached to the condition of these buildings. When a former administrative-cultural centre is in use and well maintained, attitudes become neutral. A building that is in bad condition is seen as rubbish by the locals, no matter how prominent this building was in the past.²¹ For example, the administrative-cultural centre of the Laeva Experimental State Farm, designed by Toomas Rein and erected in 1978, is in such bad condition that it has become a ghost house in the centre of the Laeva village. Since the socio-economic level of the village cannot support the restoration and reuse of this huge edifice, it is understandable that it is seen by the locals more as a problem than as a valuable object.

A building that is still functioning is sometimes also seen as a burden due to the size, era-specific spatial planning or internal design. This is clearly reflected in the administrative-cultural building of



Fig. 4: Interior of the Saare Inter-Collective Farm Construction Office, interior designer Aet Maasik (2018).

the Lümända State Farm, designed by Veljo Kaasik and completed in 1986 (Fig. 3). A few years ago, when the listing of this building as an architectural monument was in process, the local government of Lümända, which is the owner of the building, was against the plan.²² The argument was that the spatial planning of the old building was unreasonable and the building was too large to use as a government building. Although this post-modernist building was significant in its time and it is recognised as an architectural masterpiece by heritage experts today, the local government clearly was not aware of its value, since they preferred to build a new building and demolish the old one.

Another example is the administrative building of the Rapla Inter-Collective Farm Construction Office. Before it was listed as architectural heritage, there was a long discussion about heritage restrictions between the National Heritage Board of Estonia and the owner, which finally ended up in court.

Although, the owner was aware of the unique nature of this building, he did not understand the importance of keeping its still existing authentic interior. The owner fought against the heritage restrictions because he wished to make several interior design changes.²³ Both cases demonstrate that it doesn't always matter who the owner is or what the financial capabilities are but the attitude towards the Soviet built legacy may determine whether something is seen as valuable and worth preserving.

Moreover, not all the buildings that have become ruins are hopeless or should be considered doomed. The administrative building of the Saare Inter-Collective Farm Construction Office is a very good example of the successful revival of a seemingly hopeless building. This edifice, located in the capital of Estonia's biggest island, was abandoned after the dissolution of the cooperative construction organisation, stood empty and decayed for several years. Since the façade, volume and the lobby of the building were listed in 2004, it was not possible to demolish it, but national protection could not guarantee the survival of the building over the years. Therefore, the building's condition was considered to be in an emergency state, and even quite recently the former owner talked about demolishing it.²⁴ Remarkably, in less than one year the new owner was able to breathe new life into the edifice and to use this gigantic building once again as an office building (Fig. 4). This is definitely one of the rare success stories, yet it shows that it is possible to reuse a former administrative-cultural centre of a collective farm if the will exists.

Conclusion

The administrative-cultural centres that used to show the wealth and power of the collective farms have lost their original fame and purpose today.

The complicated socio-economic situation in Estonian rural areas does not support finding new proper functions or sustainable maintenance for several buildings that are unreasonably large and have low construction quality. Some edifices have been nicely adopted for new functions, but many are poorly maintained or have been left to decay.

The reason why administrative-cultural centres of collective farms should be preserved is that they are magnificent examples of modernist and post-modernist rural architecture. These buildings are the creation of talented Estonian architects and interior architects, and they are part of Estonian history. Unfortunately, it is precisely the past that has shaped a negative attitude towards Soviet-era legacy. Although the initial hostility has disappeared over the years and experts have recognised their value, public awareness of the importance of these buildings is still modest. To solve the socio-economic issues of the Estonian rural areas is a larger challenge, yet the general approach of raising awareness of the value of the administrative-cultural buildings of collective farms can contribute to the preservation of this Soviet-era architectural heritage.

Image sources

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Notes

- 1 Kolkhozes and sovhoses were both state-controlled entities based on collective farming but kolhozes did not belong to the state and they operated under registered statute. Although the word 'kolkhoze' comes from the Russian word 'колхоз' meaning 'collective farm' and 'sovhoze' could be translated as 'state farm', both cooperatives are in the literature, as well as in everyday talk, predominantly called with the common term 'collective farm'.
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