

Beyond Postmodernism: Contested Narratives of 1980s Latvian Rural Architecture

Andris Uškāns^{1*}, Regita Zeiļa², Artis Zvirgzdiņš³

¹ *Daugavpils University, Daugavpils, Latvia*

² *Riga Technical University, Rēzekne, Latvia*

³ *Art Academy of Latvia, Rīga, Latvia*

Received 2025-09-16; accepted 2026-02-16

Keywords

Administrative-cultural centres, ambiguous heritage, architectural narratives, heritage interpretation, Latvian architecture, Late-Soviet architecture, oral history, Postmodernism, post-Soviet identity, social memory.

Abstract

Latvia's 1980s rural cultural centres, built as multifunctional hubs, are framed by scholars as postmodern resistance to Soviet uniformity, but rural voices are overlooked. Using archival research and oral histories from six communities, this study contrasts professional narratives with local views of pragmatism and utility. Findings show these centres as "lived" social spaces shaped by local leadership, not just "conceived" ideological ones. This repositions them as hybrid artefacts for post-Soviet heritage.

Introduction

Architectural history is often shaped by the narratives of professional discourse – the voices of critics, designers, and historians. Yet, the story of a building is fundamentally incomplete without the experiences of the people who inhabit it. In the 1980s, the Latvian countryside witnessed a surge in the construction of administrative-cultural centres, ambitious structures intended to be multifunctional hubs for state and community life. Scholars often framed these buildings as subtle acts of resistance against Soviet uniformity, emphasising their integration of national motifs and elements now recognised as postmodern. However, architects at the time did not explicitly pursue postmodernism; rather, their contextual designs, integrating historical brickwork and vernacular forms, diverged from modernist standardisation, aligning with postmodernism in retrospect when compared to the era's rigid aesthetics.

Professional interpretations of these buildings often overlook rural perspectives, which emphasise practical utility over ideological symbolism. This paper argues that the centres' legacy lies in their role as social artefacts shaped by community welfare and resilience.

To achieve a more nuanced understanding, this study moves beyond postmodernism and employs a mixed-method approach. By drawing on Alessandro Portelli's oral history methodology [1, 1–2], this paper amplifies rural voices and community memories, contrasting them with professional discourses. The analysis will apply Henri Lefebvre's concepts of "conceived" versus "lived" space to demonstrate the disconnect between the buildings' ideological intent and their practical, social function [2, 68–69]. Finally, the study will use Jane Jacobs's critique of top-down planning to highlight how the continued utility of these centres stems from their integration into a complex social fabric [3, 145]. Ultimately, this research advocates for a more inclusive architectural history that prioritises the lived experiences of a place's inhabitants, bridging the gap between public perception and expert appreciation.

Research in environmental psychology, including work by Seyed Abbas Yazdanfar et al., shows that architects tend to focus on aesthetic and historical qualities, while non-architects evaluate spaces through personal, emotional, and practical lenses [4]. While investigating administrative-cultural centres built in Latvia in the 1980s, it is evident that the dominant narrative of "subtle

*Corresponding author. E-mail address: andris.uskans@du.lv

© 2026 Author(s). This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

resistance” often contrasts with communities’ experiences of these buildings as sites of social welfare, resilience, and everyday utility.

By integrating architectural analyses with oral histories from local residents, this research reveals a counter-narrative grounded in pragmatism, local initiative, and informal social networks rather than overt political or nationalistic dissent. The guiding question is: How do professional interpretations of late-Soviet rural buildings align with, or diverge from, the lived experiences of their users? Examining this contrast positions these structures as complex social artefacts, shaped as much by practical needs, local pride, and communal use as by stylistic ambition or ideological intent. It also illuminates their post-Soviet trajectories, including adaptive reuse, municipal repurposing, abandonment, and contested heritage debates informed by lingering ideological associations.

This study aims to critically examine how late-Soviet Latvian rural cultural centres were conceived by architects, versus how they were experienced by local communities. Its objectives are (1) to analyse professional architectural discourse and its ideological underpinnings; (2) to document and interpret local oral histories and memories of these spaces; (3) to evaluate how both perspectives contribute to the post-Soviet heritage narrative.

I. Literature Review: Architectural Narratives and Socio-Political Contexts of Late-Soviet Rural Centres in Latvia

A. Ideological and Architectural Context

The construction of administrative-cultural centres in the Latvian countryside during the 1980s represents a pivotal intersection of Soviet planning ideology, local agency, and evolving architectural paradigms. This literature review synthesises scholarly works and contemporary press accounts to highlight the dominant professional narrative of architectural innovation and ideological resistance, revealing key gaps related to the lived experiences and practical realities of rural communities. These multifunctional facilities, commissioned by collective (*kolkhoz*) and state (*sovkhoz*) farms, were designed to serve as hubs for administration, culture, and community activities, often on a monumental scale. A key ideological driver was the Soviet aim to marginalise sacral spaces, positioning these centres as secular alternatives to churches in rural social life [5]. This shift aligned with broader late-Soviet efforts to promote atheist, collectivist values through built environments, where architecture was explicitly ideological – “Architecture is also ideology,” as Laimonis Tikmanis, one of the leading Latvian architects shaping rural spaces at the time, observed in 1988 [6].

Scholarly literature frames these buildings within the transition from rigid Soviet modernism to more expressive forms, often interpreting them as manifestations of postmodernism. This departure from earlier brutalist and functionalist styles incorporated national motifs, vernacular references, and contextual elements, which some view as subtle critiques of ideological uniformity [7], [8]. For instance, designs integrated regional symbolism, such as historical brick architecture or medieval imagery, to foster cultural identity amid Soviet constraints. This can be seen in the Viesīte culture house (see Fig. 1), which employed theatrical, kitsch medieval symbolism like castle gates and towers, a feature by critics celebrated as a postmodern “masterpiece” [9]. Similarly, the Renda administrative building, Pampāļi household services complex, Bērzgale administrative-cultural complex, and other rural buildings of the fused traditional forms with postmodern motifs to respect nearby historical architecture.



Fig. 1. Viesīte Cultural Centre “Sēlija”. Architect Linards Skuja, 1983–1992. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2025.

However, expressing such individuality carried risks; builders of unique structures sometimes faced accusations of being “enemies of socialism” [6]. While these interpretations highlight architectural innovation, they predominantly stem from urban-based professionals, creating a significant gap in understanding the practical implementation and use from the rural communities’ perspective. The literature offers a top-down view, largely ignoring how local leaders’ pragmatic choices, material shortages, and informal networks shaped the final built forms.

B. Architectural Narratives:

Postmodernism or ‘Quiet Rebellion’

The 1980s marked a significant evolution in Latvian rural architecture, moving away from the state-sanctioned uniformity of modernism toward more expressive and context-sensitive forms guided by the motto “Every city,

every settlement should have its own face" [10]. This pivot was particularly evident in the design of rural cultural centres. While the officially sanctioned aesthetic remained under the purview of Soviet authority, a new generation of architects found ways to subtly subvert this control. They introduced elements of postmodernism, a style that favoured historical references, symbolic forms, and playful decorum over the rigid functionalism of the preceding era. In 1985, architect Jānis Lejnieks observed that "within the span of a single generation of architects, attitudes toward historic buildings had shifted from the previously accepted necessity of restoring only unique monuments to the rehabilitation of their background fabric, the ordinary built environment" [11].

Within this framework, architects embraced contextualism, a design philosophy that sought to integrate new buildings with their existing physical, cultural, and historical surroundings. Rather than imposing a generic, one-size-fits-all architectural solution, designers began to incorporate vernacular forms and local motifs [12]. This included the use of historical brickwork, steeply pitched roofs inspired by local farmsteads, and layouts that referenced traditional Latvian village structures [13], [14] (see Fig. 2). These design choices were not merely aesthetic; they were a deliberate attempt to assert a sense of regional and national identity within a politically monolithic system.



Fig. 2. Abandoned administrative-cultural centre in Rundāni, Ludza district. Architect Laimonis Tīkmanis, 1982–1987. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2024.

The result was a series of buildings that stood as unique, often monumental, works of architecture, such as the cultural centres in Gaigalova and Kalni. These structures were hailed in professional circles as a testament to the architects' ability to resist ideological rigidity through spatial and symbolic innovation. However, this narrative of resistance, often celebrated by an urban-based professional class, tells only part of the story. It neglects to consider how these buildings were perceived by the very communities for whom they were designed, creating a tension between the

buildings as "conceived space" (the architects' intellectual vision) and "lived space" (the community's daily reality) [2].

While this paper references postmodernisms, it distinguishes three related yet distinct conceptual layers. As a stylistic designation, postmodernism refers to formal eclecticism and symbolic revival. Within professional discourse, it signifies architects' negotiation of contextualism and individuality under Soviet uniformity. In retrospective historiography, postmodernism becomes a lens through which later scholars interpret ideological resistance. This study acknowledges these distinctions to avoid conflating aesthetic features with professional self-perception or later reinterpretation.

C. The Clash of Ideals and Realities

Contemporary periodicals and architectural critiques reveal a self-reflective professional discourse in which architects positioned themselves as cultural intermediaries pursuing contextual sensitivity over prefabricated uniformity [15]. Tīkmanis advocated for "more individual solutions – architecture that is emotional and attuned to the spiritual atmosphere of its surroundings" [15]. However, this idealism clashed with Soviet realities: centralised planning, unreliable material supplies, and client-driven modifications often compromised designs [13]. For example, in the Kalni complex, kolkhoz chairmen altered heights, finishes, and interiors, diluting intentions [16]; similarly, Bērzgale suffered from "builder indifference" and construction flaws like leaking roofs [17]. Projects like Mālpils (see Fig. 3) endured 15-year delays, highlighting systemic inefficiencies [13].



Fig. 3. Mālpils Cultural Centre, Sigulda district. Architect Laimonis Tīkmanis, 1974–1985. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2025.

Yet the architects' call for buildings to integrate with their surroundings was not always achieved. Writing about the Kalni complex, architect Juris Plēsums noted that the "building resembles a well-cared-for child, nourished on wholesome bread, with whom everything would be wonderful, if only that child were not lacking something

essential: its own attitude toward the environment” [16]. Of the Gaigalava complex, the press observed that “unfortunately, one does not feel a true unity between the old and the new. The newly built, distinctive complex currently stands somewhat apart from the village itself” [17].

Another challenge faced by architects and builders was the shifting demands of clients and the resulting project modifications. Reflecting on his protracted work on the Mālpils complex, Tikmanis remarked: “The director now says – we still need this and that. Sometimes our needs exceed both our capacities and our understanding” [6]. In Kalni, “the dormitory-hotel was built with five storeys instead of the two planned in the project; the height of the sports hall was considerably increased; [...] A second-floor foyer was converted into a disco hall; the client entirely replaced the intended exposed aggregate marble-chip plaster on the exterior walls with profiled aluminium sheets; different windows were installed in the façades than those specified in the design; and the library’s skylights were substituted with windows on a façade that, in the project’s composition, had been conceived as a pure, unbroken surface” [16].

Broader critiques targeted standardised designs (e.g., “Līvānu houses”) for homogenising villages [14], advocating instead for sustainable, context-appropriate alternatives influenced by global movements like “Small is Beautiful” [18]. This body of work identifies known tensions – between ideological ambition and logistical constraints – but underexplores informal networks (e.g., bartering) or local leaders’ roles, creating a gap that oral histories can fill. Theoretically, postmodernism here serves as a framework for analysing these shifts, not as stylistic excess but as a response to ideological disintegration [19].

D. Contested Post-Soviet Legacy

By the late 1980s, architects themselves began to criticise the fascination with monumentality in rural construction. In a 1988 interview, Tikmanis remarked:

– It would be good if no one were now carried away with gigantism. The large farms are already breaking up, and small centres are forming. [...] People no longer even want to experience culture by gathering together as an entire village (kolkhoz). Yet the commissions keep coming – give us a hall with 600 seats! [...] Most likely, many separate family farms will emerge, and families will leave the villages [6].

Post-1991, these centres’ fates diverged amid the Soviet collapse: some were abandoned or unfinished, others repurposed as municipal offices, libraries, or shops, often losing decorative elements [20]. Public perception remains negative, associating them with the regime, complicating heritage protection, especially post-2014 start of Russian aggression in Ukraine, in the Baltics, where aggression toward Soviet remnants intensified [20]. Literature notes their “ambiguous legacy,” caught between utility and

ideological taint, with experts recognising postmodern value in sites like Nigrande or Satiķi, yet lacking formal safeguards [7]. Community-led reuses (e.g., as youth centres) occur quietly, without re-evaluation [21]. This reveals a gap in heritage discourse: while interwar or vernacular architecture fits national narratives, late-Soviet structures occupy a “grey zone,” haunted by origins yet practically indispensable [20]. Addressing this requires integrating lived memories to challenge urban-centric views and inform nuanced interpretations.

II. Method: Research Design and Data Collection

The mixed qualitative approach outlined below serves as the practical framework for applying the theoretical lenses of Lefebvre and Jacobs, allowing this study to empirically explore the contrast between “conceived” and “lived” space [2]. The research methodology for this paper is informed by the principles outlined in *Architectural Research Methods* by Linda Groat and David Wang [22]. To create a comprehensive and robust analysis, this study employs a qualitative approach that uses triangulation. As Groat and Wang explain, triangulation involves using multiple data sources or methods to validate findings. In this case, the research triangulates two distinct perspectives: the analysis of architectural design and professional discourse (traditional historical research), and the collection of local community memories (oral history) [22]. This combined approach allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the buildings by cross-referencing expert narratives with the lived experiences of the people who used them, thereby challenging the urban-centric view and offering a more inclusive historical narrative.

This study employs a mixed qualitative approach to address the central research question: How and why do professional architectural interpretations of late-Soviet rural cultural centres in Latvia align with or diverge from the everyday experiences and memories of the communities that inhabited them? By combining archival analysis of contemporary press and architectural sources with oral history interviews, the method aims to synthesise diverse perspectives, revealing counter-narratives rooted in local pragmatism. This design is particularly suited to exploring interpretive disconnects, as it allows for triangulation between written professional discourses and lived rural accounts, ensuring reliability through cross-verification while capturing nuanced insights into historical and cultural dynamics.

To move beyond the predominant architectural and professional critiques, this study employs oral history as its primary methodology, echoing the approach of Alessandro Portelli in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*. Portelli argues that oral sources are not simply a means to gather facts, but are essential for understanding the

"meaning and form" of historical memory. This approach allows us to shift the focus from what these buildings were intended to be, as conceived by state architects, to what they actually became in the eyes of the community. By collecting and analysing the community's memories, we can access a historical narrative shaped by lived experience and resilience, a narrative that exists in productive tension with the official record [1].

A. Data Sources and Sampling

The primary data sources include two complementary strands: secondary archival materials and primary oral histories. Archival data were drawn from contemporary Latvian periodicals (e.g., *Literatūra un Māksla, Padomju Jaunatne, Māksla, Zvaigzne*) and scholarly analyses of late-Soviet architecture, as detailed in the literature review. These sources, spanning 1979–1990 and post-Soviet reflections up to 2023, were selected for their direct relevance to the buildings' design, construction, and ideological framing. Key criteria for inclusion were references to specific projects (e.g., Viesīte, Bērzgale, Kalni, Mālpils) or broader themes like postmodernism and contextualism. Approximately 60 archival items were analysed, focusing on those authored by architects to represent professional urban viewpoints.

During expeditions in 2023–2025, over 30 administrative-cultural complexes built in the 1980s were visited and photographed across Latvia. In 2024–2025, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 residents from six rural communities associated with these centres, purposively sampled to ensure diverse roles and experiences. Participants included farmers, veterinarians, agronomists, cultural administrators, former kolkhoz or sovkhos workers and chairpersons, as well as current managers and municipal administrators. Recruitment was convenience-based through local networks in Kurzeme, Vidzeme, and Latgale, emphasising direct involvement in commissioning, construction, or use, and age. Interviews, conducted in Latvian in person with informed consent, lasted 20–60 minutes, prioritising "expert" everyday users to contrast with professional narratives.

In three locations, informal public meetings were organised with local residents, former employees, and the complex administration. Discussions were guided to elicit memories about the farm, village, construction, and circumstances of the administrative-cultural centres. Meetings involved 6–8 participants and lasted 1.5–2 hours. Additionally, a 1.5-hour semi-structured interview was conducted with a club work methodologist responsible for all cultural centres in one district. Due to the volume of material, only selected fragments and quotations relevant to the study questions were transcribed. For confidentiality, all participant names, mentioned individuals, and identifying toponyms were coded, preserving only public

figures' names, the capital city, and details that could not reveal respondents' identities.

A significant proportion of the examined case studies was designed by Laimonis Tīkmanis and his colleagues from the Latvian State Rural Construction Design Institute. This reflects the institutional structure of the time, when a few design institutes dominated regional commissions. Recognising this, the analysis explicitly considers how the repetition of design philosophy and professional networks may have influenced both architectural outcomes and subsequent interpretations.

B. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Archival data were collected through thematic coding of texts for motifs like postmodernism, resistance, material challenges, etc., to identify patterns in professional discourse. Oral histories were collected using a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences, memories of use, and interpretations. Questions addressed topics such as factors influencing the construction of the centres (e.g., What had the biggest influence on the building's construction?), the integration of the centres into village life (e.g., How was the centre used by the community?), and participants' perceptions of ideological or nationalist significance (e.g., Did you see the centre as a form of resistance?). Prompts for nationalist themes were included to explore the absence of such narratives in preliminary findings.

Analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach. Archival sources and interview transcripts were first coded separately to identify emergent themes, such as ambition, resource shortages, or legacy. Comparative analysis then mapped points of alignment, such as shared recognition of contextual integration, and divergence, particularly the contrast between professionals' focus on symbolic resistance and locals' emphasis on practical community utility. The total sample of 16 interviews (12 individuals in 6 rural communities, 1 urban-based club work methodologist, and 3 group interviews) ensured thematic depth and saturation for understanding lived experience, although it does not allow for broad generalisation.

C. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This method has limitations: reliance on memory introduces recall bias, particularly for events 40+ years old, mitigated by cross-referencing with archives. The convenience sample may underrepresent marginalised voices (e.g., non-Latvian ethnic groups), and archival sources are inherently urban- and politically biased, though this aligns with the study's aim to expose such skews. All secondary data were verified for relevance; all data were verified for relevance to Latvian contexts. The study ensured voluntary participation, confidentiality,

and cultural sensitivity in a post-Soviet context where memories may evoke trauma. Interviewers were mindful of sensitive topics and paused or redirected conversations if a participant showed signs of distress. Participants were also reminded throughout the process that they could stop the interview at any time without consequence. An additional limitation is the potential for interviewer bias in a post-Soviet context, where the interviewer's identity or perceived political stance may influence how participants recall and articulate their memories, creating a risk of social desirability bias or an unintentional alignment with a dominant narrative.

III. Analysis: Interpreting Late-Soviet Rural Cultural Centres in Latvia

A. Ideological Framing: Symbolism versus Functionality

Building on the professional interpretations discussed earlier, the following analysis contrasts those narratives of resistance with the lived realities recalled by rural residents. While critics celebrated designs like Viesīte's theatrical medieval symbolism or Renda's contextual forms as departures from rigid Soviet modernism [9], oral testimonies reveal a different perspective – one grounded in function, adaptation, and community use rather than ideological subversion (see Fig. 4).

In 1985, architect Andra Mangale wrote:

– *One still encounters monotonous, tedious rows of buildings aligned along a single street. [...] Uniformity must be eradicated. At present, we dress rather uniformly, we build uniformly, and even paint the gates of our homes in colours borrowed from our neighbours* [14].

Laimonis Tīkmanis claimed:

– *Each individual building should belong to the settlement it is part of and correspond to the historically established built environment of the site* [15].



Fig. 4. A decaying mural in Rundāni Cultural Centre, blending folkloric motifs with ideological symbolism. Author unknown. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2025.

In contrast, oral histories from rural residents emphasise the centres' functional roles over symbolic significance. A district-level cultural organiser described them as part of a government program to reinforce socialist ideology through secular community hubs, dismissing nationalist undertones [23]. Residents frequently highlighted practical uses, such as hosting harvest festivals or administrative tasks [24], [25], [26], aligning with Soviet goals but lacking subversive intent.

In some cases, however, residents recalled sacral uses, complicating the secular narrative:

– *Opening took place during the Great Lent, and that's why the most religious people believed the building would not have a good future* [24, participant 6].

– *This church, [...] the chairman already built it during Soviet times [...] [chairman] planned it not as a church, you couldn't do that, but as a chapel. He knew how to get around those laws* [25, participant 4].

– *At the end of the 1980s, we organised Christmas celebrations in all three halls in G* [23].

These accounts suggest communities prioritised practical and cultural functions, reshaping the centres' ideological purpose into spaces of local meaning, distinct from the ideals communicated by professionals.

B. Practical Implementation: Ambition versus Constraints

Archival and oral sources alike highlight the tension between architectural ambition and material limitation. Professional and community perspectives both acknowledge the ambitious designs of the administrative-cultural centres, though their motivations and outcomes diverged. Archival sources highlight architects' aspirations for culturally resonant buildings, with designs like Bērzgale's Centre sparking debate for its placement opposite a Catholic church but later praised for engaging historical elements [13]. Residents echoed this contextual sensitivity, noting dialogue with local heritage [16] (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Bērzgale church of St. Ann (1792) and Bērzgale Culture House (Laimonis Tīkmanis, 1981–1986), Rēzekne district. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2023.

However, practical challenges – material shortages, bureaucratic delays, and client interventions – often altered outcomes. The Kalni complex, for instance, replaced its intended marble-chip finish with aluminium sheeting due to the kolkhoz chairman's decisions, resulting in a structure critics deemed "emotionally neutral" [16]. Many plans were never implemented as designed, since local leaders frequently modified projects according to their own preferences. Oral history narratives also address changes in the projects; however, unlike professional accounts, residents perceived these changes as entirely positive, viewing them as demonstrations of the management's resourcefulness. Oral histories recall how chairmen overrode architects:

– *The hall has a revolving floor, but the balcony wasn't included in the original design. The chairman looked at it and said, "I need a balcony." – "But it is not in the plan." – "But I need it." The same goes for the floor: "I need a floor." – "But how, boss?" – "I don't know how, that's your task."* [27].

– *See how many floors the hotel has? In villages, you're only allowed to build up to three floors; the plan had two, but we have five* [25, participant 6].

Oral histories emphasise local ingenuity, particularly the pivotal role of kolkhoz leaders in driving project completion, where the centres were built by kolkhoz or sovkhos. These leaders, often respected community figures, navigated Soviet constraints through determination and resourcefulness. One resident recalled:

– *All these doors, all of them are thanks to ash wood. [...] one winter they rounded up everyone [...] and sent them to the E forests. And there it was, all about taking the ash trees [...]. Those ashes were like the depot for this village – some went to Riga, some for "greasing palms", some here, some there. [...] How the boss managed to pull it off? I have no idea!* [27].

Such stories reveal the centrality of blat, the informal networks of favours and exchanges that substituted for planned resource distribution. Respondents frequently emphasised that "*blat was needed everywhere*," [27] even recalling the economic desperation of the 1980s: "*[...] there was a famine; you could buy a person for meat*" [24, participant 7].

Concrete examples illustrate how informal exchanges enabled construction:

– *[There] was a mirror factory in Daugavpils. We took [gave] a pig for rejects [and received reject mirror fragments in return]* [24, participant 7].

– *[speaking about the stage rotary mechanism] Down there are these wheels... from tanks, yes, from D [army base], those wheels, and also everything that turns, the whole mechanism [chassis]* [28].

This reliance on informal facilitation was not limited to local operations but extended to higher administrative levels. The district cultural events organiser observed that securing official outcomes required bypassing bureaucratic

stagnation through personal offerings, a practice they summarised directly: "*You could get something done only by going to the ministry with a bottle of vodka*" [23].

These accounts diverge from professional critiques by framing compromises not as failures but as triumphs of local agency, revealing a gap in the literature's focus on design intent over implementation realities. The alignment lies in acknowledging ambition, but locals attribute it to community enhancement, not stylistic rebellion.

Kolhoz- and sovkhos-built centres were often remembered with pride for their durability and communal significance:

– *We just celebrated 40 years, and not much has been repaired [...]. [Only] The floor was worn out from dancing* [29].

– *When the cultural centre was being built, they picked the top specialists of that time* [27].

In contrast, state-built rural centres were remembered differently. Interviews rarely mentioned administrative functions, and respondents had little knowledge of construction histories. Remarkably, even a former collective farm chairman at the time of construction could not recall under what circumstances the decision had been taken, how the site was selected, who made the key decisions, or which organisation executed the largest building in his kolkhoz [24, participant 7]. This absence of institutional memory underscores a broader disconnect between the top-down processes through which the centres were conceived and the ways they were remembered locally.

At the same time, many buildings were plagued by construction defects:

– *[...] water was leaking through the skylights, and [...] tar on the roof would melt in the sun, freeze in the frost, and crack. The roofs were leaking* [24, participant 3].

– *The construction manager of the cultural centre in F [...] told me that the quality was terrible, with a lot of negligence and defects* [23].

– *Every time it rained, a pool formed on the roof, and all of it slowly leaked through the ceiling* [30].

The implementation of administrative-cultural centres in rural Latvia was marked by an interplay between ambition and constraint. While professional discourse emphasised design innovation and cultural resonance, oral histories reveal a reality of shortages, improvisation, and local decision-making. The pervasive reliance on blat and the discretionary authority of collective farm chairmen transformed projects into expressions of local agency, where compromises became achievements. At the same time, the absence of institutional memory and recurring quality failures expose the limitations of centralised planning. These centres thus emerge as hybrid artefacts: conceived as monumental expressions of Soviet ambition but remembered as products of negotiation, resourcefulness, and community survival.

C. Community Legacy: Contested Heritage versus Practical Continuity

Ingerpuu's findings on contested heritage provide a framework against which local memories reveal pragmatic continuity rather than ideological rejection [20]. Professional sources highlight the contested heritage status of these buildings, noting that hostility toward Soviet-era architecture in the Baltics, intensified after 2014 [20] and especially following Russia's 2022 aggression in Ukraine, complicates preservation efforts for sites such as Laubere and Sutri, despite their recognised postmodern value. Many centres lost decorative elements when repurposed as libraries or offices, while others, like Rundāni, were abandoned. In contrast, oral histories emphasise ongoing utility, with residents valuing the centres as venues for weddings, concerts, or community gatherings, detached from Soviet ideology. While some centres, like Aizkalne or Nīgrande (see Fig. 6), remain unfinished, others adapted to modern needs, hosting shops, libraries, medical offices, or NGOs.



Fig. 6. Unfinished administrative-cultural centre in Nīgrande, Saldus district. Architect Laimonis Tikmanis, 1984–1986. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2025.

Residents of active centres expressed pride, recounting stories of construction or performances by notable artists, describing them as the “best in Kurzeme” or “best in the district.” In less active complexes, memories were sparse, often limited to opening concerts, with neutral attitudes toward their current state. These accounts highlight the centres' enduring social roles, prioritising practical continuity over the ideological or aesthetic concerns dominant in professional narratives.

IV. Discussion: Reconciling Interpretations and Reimagining Heritage

Urban scholars frame the centres' designs, such as Viesīte's medieval elements, as critiques of Soviet homogeneity, reflecting professional aspirations for cultural identity [7], [12]. Within broader frameworks of socialist postmodernism, these designs are interpreted

as aesthetic responses to ideological disintegration, embedding dissent in architectural form [19]. Rural residents, however, valued their practical roles as social hubs. As noted by architect Jānis Lejnieks, “In the early 1980s, the centralised Soviet architectural utopia generated its own anti-utopia in the form of conceptual projects by young architects” [18].

Portelli's emphasis on symbolic truth suggests communities transformed these spaces into sites of resilience, reflecting local priorities over ideological narratives [1]. Urban architects, operating within professional and ideological discourses, embedded cultural motifs, as Tikmanis's call for “emotional architecture” illustrates [15] (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Former household services complex with a hotel in Pampāļi, Saldus district. Architect Laimonis Tikmanis, 1982–1987. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2025.

This aligns with the literature's focus on contextualism as professional agency [10]. Conversely, rural communities, facing material shortages and bureaucratic hurdles, prioritised tangible outcomes, securing construction materials through bartering or hosting renowned performers to boost prestige, over symbolic gestures. This urban-rural divide reflects broader late-Soviet dynamics, where professional narratives drew on academic discourses, while rural priorities centred on immediate needs.

The findings align with literature framing late-Soviet architecture as cultural negotiation but reveal gaps in rural representation. While Ingerpuu notes the centres' contested post-Soviet heritage, scholarly focus on expert evaluations overlooks community voices [20]. Oral histories highlight local agency, such as bartering “pigs for mirrors” or kolkhoz-driven adaptations – extending brief mentions of pragmatic challenges like material shortages [24, participant 7], [16]. Professionals critiqued Kalni's (see Fig. 8) altered design as “emotionally neutral” [16], yet locals viewed such compromises as necessary for completion, revealing a resilience absent in urban narratives.



Fig. 8. Kalni Culture House, Saldus district. Architect Ausma Īvāne, 1987. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2025.

The centres' ongoing use as "lived space" subverts their original role as "conceived space" for Soviet ideology, aligning with Jacobs's view that vibrant public spaces emerge from daily interactions [3]. Postmodern elements in centres often seen as stylistic resistance, also served as pragmatic compromises masking material limitations, complicating binary interpretations of compliance versus dissent [19].

By integrating rural voices, this study reframes the centres as hybrid artefacts shaped by ideological constraints and local agency, offering a model for inclusive architectural histories. Their continued use as youth hubs or social service providers (e.g., offering showers or laundry) highlights enduring community value, contrasting with professional concerns about heritage recognition [20]. Heritage strategies should prioritise functional continuity – promoting adaptive reuse as libraries or community centres – over solely aesthetic or historical value, especially given post-2014 Baltic hostility to Soviet-era buildings and challenges of maintaining large structures amid declining village populations [20] (see Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Gaigalova Culture House, Rēzekne district. Architect unknown, 1980–1985. Photo by A. Uškāns, 2021.

Participatory heritage processes, incorporating rural memories, can counter urban biases and enrich post-Soviet identity narratives in Latvia and other Baltic states like Estonia and Lithuania.

The study's small, convenience-based sample (16 interviews across six communities) limits generalizability. Expanding to include non-Latvian ethnic groups or urban perspectives could further test the urban-rural divide. The absence of nationalist themes in oral histories may reflect retrospective sanitisation, warranting longitudinal studies. Aligning with calls for inclusive methodologies, future research should integrate oral and material evidence, complemented by quantitative approaches like surveys [22, 81]. In conclusion, by highlighting contrasting professional and community priorities, this study reframes these centres as multifaceted artefacts, advocating for participatory heritage approaches that prioritise utility and community resilience to bridge academic and public perceptions in post-Soviet contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that 1980s Latvian rural administrative-cultural centres were not merely architectural statements of ideological or aesthetic rebellion but also lived social infrastructures shaped by local agency. While professional discourse framed them within postmodern contextualism, oral histories revealed pragmatic adaptation and resourcefulness. The findings highlight the tension between "conceived" and "lived" space, underscoring the need for participatory heritage models that value community function alongside formal heritage recognition. Future research should expand comparative analysis across the Baltic region to further trace the hybrid legacy of socialist rural modernity.

REFERENCES

1. **Portelli, A.** *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991. 358 p.
2. **Lefebvre, H.** *The Production of Space*. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991. 464 p.
3. **Jacobs, J.** *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. 458 p.
4. **Yazdanfar, S. A., et al.** Comparison of Architects' and Non-Architects' Perception of Place. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 170, 2015, pp. 690–699.
5. **Petrulis, V.** Manifestations of Politics in Lithuanian Architecture: Examples of Architectural Dehumanisation during the Transition from a Soviet to a Post-Soviet Society. *Meno istorija ir kritika*, vol. 3, 2007, p. 214.
6. **Mukāns, A., Hiršs, J., Tikmanis, L.** No būdas līdz pilij. *Zvaigzne*, Nr. 19 (05.10.1988).

7. **Eniņa, A. Krastiņš, J.** A Culture House – a Nucleus of a Collective Farm of Soviet Latvia. *Architecture and Urban Planning*, vol. 6, 2012, pp. 43–50, 60.
<https://doi.org/10.7250/aup.2012.007>
8. **Mankus, M.** Socialist Postmodernism. The Case of the Late Soviet Lithuanian Architecture. *Architecture and Urban Planning*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2017, pp. 61–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/aup-2017-0009>.
9. **Eniņa, A.** *Mākslu ēku arhitektūra Latvijā*. Riga Technical University. Doctoral thesis. 2014, 183 p.
10. **Lauža, Z.** Kāds būs reģionālās arhitektūras liktenis? *Jaunais Inženieris*, vol. 7 (25.10.1979).
11. **Lejnieks, J.** Paaudzes portreta fragments. *Literatūra un Māksla*, vol. 29 (19.07.1985).
12. **Mangale, A.** Rendas nama mācības. *Padomju Jaunatne*, vol. 214 (06.11.1987).
13. **Mangale, A., Tikmanis, L.** Lauku arhitekts. *Māksla*, vol. 1 (01.1990), p. 76.
14. **Mangale, A.** Uguns nav izlaižama ne uz brīdi. *Padomju Jaunatne*, vol. 187 (27.09.1985).
15. **Mangale, A., Tikmanis, L.** Mājai jābūt lepnai. *Padomju Jaunatne*, vol. 88 (07.05.1985).
16. **Plēsums, J.** Procesu sakarības. *Literatūra un Māksla*, vol. 48 (29.11.1985).
17. **Kūkojs, A.** Arhitekti lauku ciematā. *Znamja Truda*, vol. 109 (13.09.1986).
18. **Lejnieks, J.** Vai atcerēsimies Latvijas arhitektūru astoņdesmitajos? *Māksla*, vol. 1 (01.1990), p. 56.
19. *Second World Postmodernisms. Architecture and Society under Late Socialism*. In: V. Kulić (ed.). London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 64, pp.143–157, 200–209.
20. **Ingerpuu, L.** Comparing the socialist rural architecture of the Baltic States: the past and the future of the administrative-cultural centres of collective farms. *SHS Web Conferences*, vol. 63, 11004, 2019, pp. 1–12.
<https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20196311004>
21. *Otchet o provedennykh novykh sovetskikh traditsiyakh za 1985 god [...]*. Regional State Archive of Rēzekne (LVA RZVA) 150–1–301, p. 4.
22. **Groat, L. N., Wang, D.** *Architectural Research Methods*. 2nd ed., Hoboken (NJ): John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013, 480 p.

Oral history:

23. *Interview with former Cultural Club Methodologist*, August 2024.
24. *Public meeting in a former kolkhoz S*, 6 August 2025.
25. *Public meeting in a former kolkhoz K*, 17 July 2025.
26. *Public meeting in a former kolkhoz G*, 12 August 2024.
27. *Interview with a cultural sector professional in the former kolkhoz K*, 17 July 2025.
28. *Interview with an administrative worker in the former kolkhoz K*, 17 July 2025.
29. *Interview with a cultural sector professional in the former kolkhoz M*, 12 June 2025.
30. *Interview with the resident in former kolkhoz B*, 30 July 2024.



Andris Uškāns is a historian and researcher at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Daugavpils University. He studied psychology at the University of Latvia and earned an MSc (Eng) from Riga Technical University Rēzekne Academy (2009–2015). Since 2018, his work has focused on regional

history, especially industrial heritage, architecture, and infrastructure. In 2022, he founded Nezināmā Rēzekne (Unknown Rēzekne), a citizen science and local history group that organises public lectures, educational tours, and community projects. He completed a Master's in history at Daugavpils University in 2024 with the Thesis on Rēzekne's construction history and is now pursuing doctoral research on the city's architectural development at Daugavpils University.



Regita Zeiļa works as Innovation Lead at the Riga Technical University Rēzekne Academy and is also the director of the Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia. Regita has worked as a Business Analyst for an Innovation Management consulting firm in Boston, USA. Her background includes

cultural and social anthropology and human geography. Her Master's Thesis focused on monoindustrial towns of Latvia; however, her interests also include antiques, old maps, ethnography, regional development, and social economy.



Artis Zvirgzdiņš is an architect and editor of the architectural platform A4D. He holds a Master's degree in Architecture (2002) from Riga Technical University and is the author of numerous publications on architecture and urban development, published on A4D and in various other media. He has

delivered lectures on architecture, urban planning, public space, and related topics at universities, conferences, and public events. He regularly leads architectural and urban tours in Riga and organises study trips to Estonia and Lithuania. He is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Art History and Theory at the Art Academy of Latvia, with his research focusing on the little-studied and marginal topic of cemetery chapels in Vidzeme and their symbolic significance. His academic interests include architecture, urban planning, place, space, cultural heritage, and landscapes. He is a member of the Latvian Association of Architects and serves on its Council.

Contact Data

Andris Uškāns

MA (History), MA (Engineering)

Daugavpils University

Address: Vienības iela 13, Daugavpils, LV-5401, Latvia

Phone: +371 29833890

E-mail: andris.uskans@du.lv

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4781-4871>

Regita Zeiļa

MA (Geography), BA (Anthropology)

Riga Technical University Rēzekne Academy

Address: Atbrīvošanas aleja 115, Rēzekne, LV-4601, Latvia

Phone: +371 27775952

E-mail: regita.zeila@rtu.lv

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6823-7678>

Artis Zvirgzdiņš

MA (Architecture)

Art Academy of Latvia

Address: Kalpaka bulvāris 13, Rīga, LV-1050

Phone: +371 29180998

E-mail: artis.zvirgzdins@gmail.com