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Restoration of settlers' vernacular built heritage in Estonia

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The built heritage of our new settlers – Russian Old Believers and Coastal Swedes – is remarkably diverse. What we are dealing with here is a unique phenomenon, wherein the immigrated peoples have brought with them a peculiar architectural expression. Due to intermittent maintenance or complete lack of it, the number of valuable buildings completed in rural settlements before the 1940s has gradually diminished. In our climate and historic environment the issue of the preservation of farmhouses has always been on the agenda.

Within the framework of the rural architecture programme at the Estonian Open Air Museum the architectural heritage in rural areas is being studied. Research into the restoration issues of architectural-historically valuable buildings can be regarded as preliminary work for anticipating the problems that can arise at the

maintenance of nationally valued buildings (including the ones preserved at museums or those under heritage protection).

At the restoration of older wooden and stone buildings we are confronted with a number of problems related to the concept, methods of repair and construction work. What kind of features should be valued in simple buildings? As it is possible to pre-empt some of the painful backlashes in this process, what methods of building should we choose and how should things be done? How should the building be used further on?

As a general vision, the charter of the ICOMOS International Wood Committee comprising the preservation and restoration principles for wooden buildings and constructions has been applied. The articles of the charter have been analysed in a book by Knut Einar Larsen and Nils Marstein „Conservation of Historic Timber Structures. An Ecological Approach“ (2000).

The Norwegian authors admit that definitely there is more than one approach to the restoration of historic wooden structures. The Wood Committee has laid the main emphasis on ecological conservation, monitoring and maintenance of valuable buildings. Yet, we should elicit a few general proposals from the charter about the restoration of historic wooden structures, including the following:

- Conduct preliminary investigation;
- Change the initial material minimally;
- Preserve the authenticity and entirety of the building;
- Apply traditional building techniques;
- Duplicate the initial material exactly;
- Select replacement material of the right quality;
- Identify the new parts;

Limit the use of poisonous timber preservatives (Larsen, Marstein 2000: 129–132).

The article gives a survey of two groups of new settlers by the example of two restorable ecclesiastical buildings. The church of Raja village, which is under heritage protection, is situated next to the Old Believers' prayer house on the shore of Lake Peipsi. Sutlepa chapel was transferred from the Noarootsi Peninsula to the Estonian Open Air Museum in 1970.

Living culture of Lake Peipsi Russians

The Russian Old Believers resettled on the shores of Lake Peipsi partly in the 17th, but mainly in the 18th century from the regions of Vitebsk, Tver and Novgorod in Russia. The area has been actively populated until today. The Russian Old Believers' villages in Lake Peipsi area have a very dense structure, with farmhouses situated in close proximity to each other. The central place in the entirely preserved village milieu is usually occupied by a church, which is also the case with the Raja Church under heritage protection. This region does not boast farm complexes under protection, although the establishment of a milieu area (Varnja, Kolkja and Kasepää villages) is under consideration.

In Peipsi Russian villages the main building materials were timber and boulders. Yet, the master masons in this region were especially famous for their boulder buildings. They used to erect beautiful structures of, above all, granite, but also red brick all over Estonia: churches, dwelling houses on farms, and outbuildings on manors and farms. Today, of course, more modern materials are used additionally – houses with baulk or building block construction, which, in spite of

new building materials, follow the conservative local building volume and proportions.

A significant feature of a local inhabitant's household is the accumulation of different constructional and domestic layers. In dwellings and outbuildings you can encounter a chaotic mixture of modern or traditional materials, which is characteristic of the place and looks great. According to the words of the restoration specialist Olev Suuder, a small plot holds, besides buildings, also numerous items of personal property, which to a stranger's eye leaves quite an untidy impression of an ordinary lakeside village; yet, it is typical of the local tradition. In the local villages external elements should be emphasised; therefore the meticulously tidied and restored farms look strange in this countryside (Suuder 2004: 22-23).

„... These villages have managed to preserve their faith and way of life for a very long time and also further on we can rely on these people's self-confidence, their conservatism and rationalism, which contradict one another only at first glance.” (Suuder 2004: 24). Counselling and emphasising the value of the local built heritage should suffice to preserve the buildings here.

Church in Raja village

The prayer house in Raja village was built due to the decrees against Old Believers issued during the reign of tsar Nikolai I, on the basis of which several Old Believers' churches both in Russia and Estonia were closed down in the 1840s. As a counter-action, prayer houses for “local purposes” providing shelter for the whole congregation were erected in several villages in Lake Peipsi area

with the support of wealthier merchants. In Raja village a prayer house was completed in 1902 and ten years later also a church with five towers (Suuder 2004: 22).

The church built next to the prayer house was destroyed in the fire of 1944. The only parts that survived were the belfry and the open porch. It is quite exceptional that the tower was rescued from fire: usually Old Believers keep the firemen away from fire to let God's will be implemented. Ordinary buildings are replaced by new dwellings similar to the former ones (Metslang 2010:1).

In the 1950s the missing part of the wall of the preserved belfry was covered with panelling. The later repairs of the belfry in the 1990s were quite remarkable – it was in such a bad condition that the belfries were under threat. The rotten wooden construction was demolished and replaced by a new building made of Soviet-time ash and cement blocks and concrete panels. The new construction was covered similarly to the initial one with wood siding; the only parts that were preserved from the old building were the stone foundation, the stairway, the wooden porch gable roof and old window frames, and certainly also the bells.

„... The Old Believers' activity was characterized by rationality and differentiation between the essential and inessential. Bells and listening to their ringing from the belfry was and is of primary importance to them. The building material of the belfry construction was of secondary importance.” (Suuder 2004: 23). When the building was repaired, main attention was paid to its former appearance with its details.

By today it has become obvious that the congregation is willing to restore the church. In order to preserve the Old Believers' living culture, they would like to

make a replica of the building in the future. However, this is not conservation in the heritage protection manner (Suuder 2004: 24).

On the initiative of the congregation and Kasepää commune the foundation and the floor of the church were restored in 2004. The walls of the foundation were still erect; yet, the binding mortar had been washed out from between the boulders. The entrance to the sepulchre had fallen in and the concrete floor slabs were practically without any reinforcement. In the course of investigation fragments of the old slab floor were discovered, which were stored in the congregation rooms.

The construction was cleaned of dirt and growing trees. New concrete floor was cast. New stones were laid in the base and joints were newly filled with lime mortar, also the initial position of stones in the wall was preserved. The sepulchre was cleaned and its metal door was fixed.

For the complete restoration of the church a thorough reconstruction project has to be drawn up for the building under heritage protection on the basis of archival research. Attention must be paid to era-authentic façade, and boarding must be mounted by the example of the original and finished in oil paint. The building must preserve doors and windows with wooden frames like in the original. It is essential to restore the dome form of the roof. It seems that in Peipsi-Russian area no special attention must be paid to the use of original material in the construction; rather, historical façade and interior should be maintained.

Coastal Swedes' vernacular built heritage

The older dwelling types of the Coastal Swedes, who inhabited the coastal regions of North and West Estonia as well as the islands in the Middle Ages, started to change and gradually disappear already in the early 20th century. Due to the emigration of the natives during the Second World War, part of the cultural landscape perished, and the few preserved buildings have by now been rebuilt several times. Fragments of the Coastal Swedes' villages can be found all over Western and Northern Estonia, including the Noarootsi Peninsula, in Vihterpalu area, and on Vormsi and Ruhnu Islands.

The heritage protection specialist Elo Raukas describes the Noarootsi Peninsula as Coastal Swedes' relic landscape, where the evolution process has been severed. However, for local Estonians it is a developing landscape. The Coastal Swedes' settlements cannot be converted into museum exhibits; yet, the authenticity of their built heritage must be preserved. It is mostly the local inhabitants who can contribute to the preservation and evaluation of their farm architecture, but they must be supported by counselling (Raukas 2002: 6-12).

The main building material in coastal regions is pine logs – timber is the most popular building material all over Estonia. Instead of brick and granite architecture in Peipsi Russian villages we here encounter the use of limestone in different parts of buildings. Differently from mainland Estonia, dwelling houses in coastal areas are painted in Falun red. In the 19th century roofs still used to be covered with straw; until today roofs have been made of reed. The living-room floor was usually made of wooden boards, whereas the kitchens and anterooms had clay or dirt floors (Raukas 2002: 57-59).

While restoring buildings in this area, special attention should be paid to the preservation of the entirety of the building. In case regular maintenance ceases,

the repair of damages and the restoration of the authentic appearance of the building requires a more thorough project documentation as well as cooperation between the owner, the designer and the historian. In order to preserve buildings, emphasis should be laid on notifying the local population and reminding them constantly about the value of the few preserved Coastal Swedes' farm buildings.

Sutlepa chapel

The case of Sutlepa chapel is remarkable against the background of the fading Coastal Swedes' settlement. The chapel that was initially situated in Noarootsi parish was one of the oldest dated log buildings in Estonia – only Ruhnu Church might be somewhat older. As such, this unique building would have inestimable historic and architectural value. By today only a fractional part of the older substance of the building dated into the 17th century has been preserved and the building transferred into the Estonian Open Air Museum is largely a reconstruction.

While reconstructing Sutlepa chapel, the initial historic and stylistic appearance of the building has been considered. The ancient form and construction have been preserved: it is an unusually high wooden building with simply notched corners, with a quadrangular body and a narrower choir in the east. The main entrance is in the west. The initial building was made of pine, with logs hewn from both sides. Besides common joints with a "head", dovetail-notched inner corners of the choir are exceptional. The building is covered by a high roof: the western part of the nave has a hipped end - this is where the chapel tower is; the eastern end of the nave is gabled. Above the western entrance there is an

extended roof, which is made up of four beams seated on the ceiling and two thin posts and a crossbeam supporting rafters (Metslang 2007:57).

From the technical point of view, the restoration work has been completed perfectly. For the foundation limestone characteristic of this region has been used. Walls have been hewn of quality pine timber. However, the hewing technique does not follow the original: in the 18th century axe heads with a chin were still in use; however, the restoration work has been carried out with a Russian-type chinless axe with a broader cutting edge. Grooving and joint-preparing techniques follow the originals, and the replacement logs have been hewn in relatively initial measurements. The roof construction had to be replaced by a new one due to extensive damage, and the roof was covered with reed. In order to achieve stylistic uniformity, the larger windows that were made in the 1930s were replaced by smaller ones at the museum.

This is an exceptional restoration concept: the only way to preserve the building was to dismantle it and build it up again at the museum to regain the stylistic features. Due to restoration much of the initial material has been lost, and the authenticity of the building has also been damaged by environmental changes. From the technical point of view the work has been completed skilfully.

Conclusion

Besides the few theoretical studies in this sphere, these two object investigations enable us to create an initial vision or a generalization of the key issues related to the restoration of wooden and stone buildings of the new settlers.

The entirety of the building is preserved when the restoration concept, building methods and the real building work are in unison. The concept is determined by the following:

The debate assembly, i.e., in an ideal case, an architect, an engineer, a carpenter-craftsman, the owner;

Investigation of the technical condition of the building, determining the damages;

Investigation of the building technologies;

Investigation of the history and architectural history of the locality, settlement and farmstead;

Further use;

Preservation of the physical entirety of the building;

Initial building technology and working in compliance with it;

Preservation of authenticity;

Preservation of initial material;

Technical possibilities;

High level of duplication;

Proper quality of replacement materials.

The restoration concept must certainly be object-centred: two different buildings can not have the same repair principles and aims. Each structure is uniquely different. Theoretically speaking, these conditions should guarantee an era-authentic final result, presuming that the restoration method and construction work follow the concept.

In case of the aforementioned restorations we have to differentiate between different traditions. The work of Russian Old Believers differs from the approach adopted by the Coastal Swedes. In the easternmost part of Estonia the building of a replica church is feasible as the local population and demand have survived.

In the western part of the country, however, the sanctuary would have been taken to a museum already in the 1970s; when the population disappeared, their built heritage was left unmaintained and often perished.

Peipsi Russians' historic buildings are still often used by their owners. The congregation of Raja Church is looking forward to the completion of a replica church. The local historic dwelling houses are still in use. The Coastal Swedes' buildings, on the other hand, are under careful monitoring of the heritage protection and museum circles.

The use of original material is self-evident in the maintenance of Coastal Swedes' constructions, but this is not the case with Lake Peipsi Russians: as is inherent in live culture, reasonable handy resources are used. In the case of a monument like Raja Church, attention was rather paid to the original appearance, whereas the construction was made of concrete and blocks.

In the Coastal Swedes' area consensus has to be found between the two approaches: the museal-heritage protection idealistic and the local, often pragmatic one. The restoration of museal buildings or those under heritage protection necessitates thorough preliminary work, not unhappy head-wagging afterwards. In Lake Peipsi Russian settlements it will suffice to counsel the owners, although the establishment of milieu-areas is on the agenda already. The most scorching issue is the restoration of built heritage in private property, which requires special investigation.

The Coastal Swedes' historic-social environment has disappeared, whereas the Old Believers' culture still survives. In the latter case we should prefer the preservation of the living tradition to cherishing lifeless matter.

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