



## **Mežaparks in Riga – One of the First Garden Cities in Europe**

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General interest of improving of the quality of urban life remarkably arose in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most popular principles were:

1. Eliminating of the density of built up environment thus improving the sanitary conditions of housing;
2. Healthy housing (development of the “Garden Cities”).

Both principles were used in Riga, the contemporary capital city of Latvia and the major harbour on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Local building regulations issued in 1904 increased the minimal area of courtyards on each plot from 91 m<sup>2</sup> to 136.6 m<sup>2</sup>.

Several buildings were constructed with the idea to provide apartments with more light and sun making wide and green courtyard (apartment building *Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela 33*, 1911–1912, architect Edgar Friesendorff; Apartment building *Bīrvības iela 88*, 1912, architects Jānis Alksnis, Konstantīns Pēkšāns and Ernests Pole, etc.). In 1913, the *Forburg*, a whole block consisting of eight apartment buildings on separate plots, was constructed. All buildings are arranged around an inner street, from which wide, sunny and green courtyard open up.

The earliest examples of housing conceptually similar to garden cities appeared in England already in 1880-ies. Nevertheless, the creation of real garden cities became widespread only after the publication of Sir Ebenezer Howard's (1850–1928) book “*To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*” in 1898 reprinted in 1902 as “*Garden Cities of To-Morrow*”. Some ideas of Howard were anticipated already by Theodor Fritsch in his book “*The City of Tomorrow*” (*Die Stadt der Zukunft. – Leipzig*, 1896). Garden City Associations were founded in England and Germany, as a result of which the first garden cities appeared – Letchworth (1903) and Hempstead (1906), close to London, Hellerau near Dresden (1909) etc.

The idea behind Mežaparks (*Kaiserwald*) in Riga, the hilly area covered with pine forest, was conceived at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main promoter of construction there a new “Colony of Villas” was the former Riga City engineer Adolph Aghte. In 1900, the Riga City municipality decided that the idea should be put into force. Plan for the new street network was drawn up by Georg Kuphaldt (1853–1938), landscape architect and Director of the Riga City Gardens. The first building there (at *Sudrabu Edžus iela 1*, architect Friedrich Scheffel) was constructed in 1902. Horse tram line connecting Mežaparks with the city centre was constructed in 1903. It was converted in electric one in 1910. All construction work in Mežaparks had to be executed in accordance with strict regulations, limiting the height of each building (no more than 2 floors), density of buildings on plots, set-back lines etc.

Eighteen villas had been built in Mežaparks by 1908. This number had doubled by 1910. The decision was made then to increase construction, and the project for the second

stage, extending built up area in northern direction, was commissioned to the German urban planner Hermann Jansen.

By the start of World War I more than 110 buildings were constructed in Mežaparks. Almost all they are typical examples of Art Nouveau, predominantly reflecting language of German "Heimatstil". Nearly 50 buildings were designed by architect Gerhard von Tiesenhausen (1878–1917). He worked out also a detailed project for housing in the area of Stokholmas iela and Visbijas prospekts. Most of the buildings in this area were single family houses, but a number – semidetached houses. They are located mainly along Stokholmas iela. Layouts of all of them are rather similar, but exterior architecture differs from house to house.

World War I stopped any construction not only in Mežaparks, but in the whole of Latvia. Construction renewed again in the second half of 1920-ies, maximum obtaining around the turn of 1920-ies and 1930-ies. 30–40 buildings each year were constructed in 1928–1932. Predominant style was Functionalism or the Modern Movement. Popular type of buildings constructed during the inter-war period was a house with two separate apartments, one of them occupying the whole of the ground floor and another one – the upper floor of the building.

Mežaparks is an excellent place of living. It is listed as urban monument of state significance.