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Latvian Architecture – the Pride of Latvia

Since time immemorial, houses have been built in Latvia with their architectural quality often rivaling that of the world renowned masterpieces of architecture. People from all over the world come to admire Riga. There is a lot to see, especially in the historic centre of the city which in 1997 was inscribed on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List. Its largest value is the unique Art Nouveau architecture created in the early 20th century when a new generation of architects began working in Riga. The young architects acquired their professional education at Riga Polytechnic Institute where the school of architecture was opened in 1869. It is not an exaggeration to say that Riga was built by the Latvians.

The same school of architecture in Riga, which today is the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning at Riga Technical University, maintains the traditions of architectural education that have been established more than 140 years ago. The majority of architects practicing in Riga and in other cities of Latvia are the graduates of the local university. That is why the school bears great responsibility for the processes going on in Latvian architecture.

The real high-quality architecture does not attract attention with its unusual and vainglorious image or originality created for the sake of originality, but with a proper artistic composition that perfectly fits in the urban context, creating a harmonious balance and clearly perceivable references to the surrounding environment. Over the last few years several such regard-deserving buildings have indeed been built.

The Latvian National Opera was one of the first monumental public buildings that was reconstructed and extended after the restoration of the independence of Latvia (1992–2001, architects Imants Jākobsons, Juris Gertmanis, Indra Grietēna etc.). The extension of the Opera is an example of perfect contextual architecture. At the beginning of the 21st century the skyline of Riga acquired a new striking feature – the high-rise of Hansabanka (now Swedbank) on the left riverbank of the Daugava, at Balasta dambis 1a (2001–2004, architects Viktors Valgums (sen.), Uldis Bērziņš (sen.), Alvis Zlaugotnis and Ieva Bērziņa). The building ignited a harsh controversy. Some claimed it to be one of the ugliest structures ever seen, yet the result is a spectacular adornment not only for Riga, but for the entire architecture of Latvia.

Restoration and renovation of the heritage handed down over the generations and its transformation according to the present requirements is one of the most significant and, in any case, one of the most expensive achievements of contemporary architecture. Restoration of the unique ensembles of wooden houses in Riga, especially in Kalnciema iela and in Kīpsala are great examples.

Many old manor houses have acquired a new life. The restoration of the lords' house of Mālpils Manor (2006–2008, architect Dita Lapiņa, interior designer Ināra Cine) and renovation and extension of the lords' house of Rūmene Manor in Tukums district, Kandava area (2004–2009, architects Zaiga Gaile and Līga Apine) are the most recent accomplishments in Latvian culture.

In many places in Latvia new groups of dwelling houses have appeared. Arriving

in Riga from Jelgava, attention gripping is the apartment building in Riga, at Vienības gatve 192 (2005–2008, architects Jānis Norde and Ansis Auziņš). Maybe the house seems unusual due to its dark color; however, it represents a modern version of a long-established tradition: the dark grey tone with the contrasting colored finish details prevails also in the façades of the buildings designed in the style of National Romanticism at the beginning of the 20th century. Several high-quality houses have appeared in the densely built-up historic center of Riga and its protection zone – the residential and office building at Martas iela 7 (2006–2008, architect Gatis Legzdīņš), the residential buildings at Miera iela 59/61 (2005–2008, architects Gatis Legzdīņš, Anita Zariņa, Dace Lazdiņa and Ligita Lauberga) and at Krāslavas iela 14 (2006–2009, architect Guntis Grabovskis, assistant architect Kristīne Brakmane, designer Jānis Mercs) and others. The latter appears slightly extravagant, although it boasts the typical and inescapable finish made up of a large expanse of glass and polished stone, yet thanks to the strong articulation of forms accurate in their scale, it perfectly fits into the historic environment.

In the inter-war period Latvia could take pride in hundreds of newly built schools, though they lacked sports halls. Over the last ten years, many of those schools have acquired large and modern sports facilities. One of them – at Talsi Secondary School No 2 and Primary School at Milenbaha iela 32 (2007–2008, architects Uldis Pīlēns, Guna Pīlēna, Dzintars Heinsbergs and Ilze Ķauķe) – in 2008 won the Grand Prix as the best building of the year in Latvian architecture.

Along with economic growth, demand for office spaces has risen. And the architecture of those seemingly simple buildings actually shows the greatest artistic variety. Already in 2005, the Latvian Annual Award in Architecture was given to the office complex "Baltais vējš" (White Wind) in Mārupe, at Kārļa Ulmaņa gatve 119 (2003–2006, architects Dace Brezinska and Pēteris Venckovičs).

The building, which is well visible on the side of the highway, consists of two intermingling volumes, balanced in their artistic composition, enclosed in concrete shells and glazed on the sides. The new complex of administrative buildings of the Ministry of the Interior in Riga, at Čiekurkalna garā līnija 1 (2002–2008, “Sarma & Norde, Ltd.”, architects Visvaldis Sarma, Gunta Grikmane and Māris Pērkons) and the office building in Riga, at Skanstes iela 13 (2005–2008, “Vizuālās Modelēšanas Studija”, architects Daiga Bikše, Daina Levane, Ivars Šmits and Oļegs Stefjuks) stand out with an impressive spatial solution and elaborated details.

The Swedbank branch building in Valmiera, at Rīgas iela 15 (2006–2009, architects Mārtiņš Jaunromāns, Māra Ābele and Liene Daņilēviča) is a small, very modern building, which differs from everything else surrounding it, yet it blends surprisingly well into the urban environment. The original, cylindrically shaped new administrative building of the JSC “Latvijas Gāze” in Riga, at Vagonu iela 20 (2004–2008, architects Juris Šūpols and Ivars Šļivka) clearly shows its reaction to the elements of the surrounding cityscape – gas reservoirs and water towers. In its turn, the building of the pilot training centre of SAS Flight Academy in the territory of the Riga International Airport (2007, designing office of Valdis Zariņš jointly with the Norwegian office “Stein Halvorsen AS”) displays the expression close to the language of Deconstructivism, realized in the materials characteristic of the Latvian architectural traditions.

Very interesting is the new building of Swedbank branch of Jelgava, Pasta iela (2006–2008, architects Dēvijs Šīraks and Raivo Veisbergs). It was established in a standard movie theatre designed during the Stalin period like an antique temple. The architects

have managed to combine seemingly incompatible elements, since the spatial structures of a movie theater and an office building are very dissimilar. Nevertheless, the new building is a modern and semantically precise structure that has almost completely retained its previous, distinctive architecture.

Also among the designs of industrial buildings there are noteworthy architectural achievements. A few years ago a new brewery “Užavas alus” was built in Užava parish, Ventspils district (2005–2008, architects Uldis Pīlēns, Guna Pīlēna, Dzintars Heinsbergs, Inese Žaļima and Ilze Ķauķe). It has brought some fresh and dynamic features to the traditional rural landscape. Whereas the publishing house “Britania” that has been partly embedded in the ground in Daugmale parish, Riga region (2004–2007, architects Andris Kronbergs and Raimonds Saulītis) is fully integrated into the spacious scenery of the Daugava Valley with its characteristic sloping hills. In this case it is not only the success of the architectural idea, it is also a bright technical and ecological solution. In 2007 this building was awarded Grand Prix in Latvian architecture.

All the abovementioned buildings reflect the level of architectural education in Latvia. Their pictures deserve to be published in any edition devoted to the issues of world architecture.

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Photo: Vilnis Auziņš

