

The Historic Town Structures of Tartu – The Historical Overview and Main Preservation Problems Today

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The first part of this paper should give a historical overview of wooden heritage in Tartu - the most actual matter of my everyday-work as a county supervisor. The second part will highlight the actual problems today and reach the main question - how to avoid decay of this heritage and how to create favourable conditions for the preservation of historic suburbs.

I kindly hope, the following workshop will generate some ideas.

The oldest remained built heritage of Tartu city – as an old Hanseatic town throughout its history repeatedly destroyed in wars and fires – mostly originates from the 18th century (most of it after the last great fire in 1775). The town-plan itself is partly mediæval and some parts of the oldest buildings also originate from earlier periods.

Earlier periods are documented in some superficial descriptions and the results of archaeological excavations. The remains of the oldest wooden buildings, dated to the 11-13th centuries provide confirmation that the local building tradition is very old. Probably some traditional building types and constructions used in the 18th and 19th century have their origins in earlier analogues.

Before the great fire of 1775 the housing in Tartu (despite some representative stone buildings in the town centre) mostly consisted of 1 to 1,5-storey wooden dwelling-houses, a style which probably originated from the previous period-, after the year 1720. In the fire most of the earlier housing burned down. Only some quarters in the old town and the districts on the outskirts of the town were spared by the fire. In 1785 by Ukase of Katherine II, the construction of wooden buildings in the central town area was prohibited. Some of the earliest wooden houses there have nevertheless survived until today.

In the Tartu old town we today have some more or less reconstructed old wooden dwelling-houses from the period between 1720-1770.

This earlier type of wooden dwelling-house is characterised by a high late-baroque hip-roof or partial hip roof, of approximately 2/3 of the height of the building. In the centre or sometimes at one side of the building it had a massive smoke-hood kitchen and two or four heated chambers near it. Facades (such as Lutsu 2 and 8) originally had vertical boarding (later these were plastered). The window openings were relatively small, with 6 or 9 panes.

The houses usually had simple baroque-shaped inner doors and some other stylistic details. Interior walls were usually plastered and painted.

This house-type – known as old-Baltic or east-Prussian dwelling-house - was common to the modest manor-houses, pastorates and dwelling-houses from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century.

Some houses of the same type in the former outskirts of town and the oldest houses in the Supilinn and Ülejõe suburbs originate from the period shortly after the fire (1770-1790s).

Another building type was the late baroque wooden dwelling-house with mansard roof, of which today only one example in Kalevi street is left – there were several similar houses in other town-districts.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the facades acquired a modern neo-classical appearance. In many cases eaves were raised higher and a central fronton has been attached. This also made it possible to take the attic into use (roof garrets were often rented as flats for students). Instead of the former vertical baroque-boarding the smooth horizontal

empire-boarding comes into use. Some of the former dwelling-houses, are the examples of this transformation.

After 1810, the unified Russian façade prototypes were enforced. Numerous dwelling-houses modelled after the prototypes may be found in Kalevi street, Supilinn and Ülejõe. Typical of this period are the regular 3, 5 or 7-axed facades with central frontons, segment-shaped windows, profiled and indented cornices, paned corner boarding, and other neo-classical stylistic elements - capitels and pilasters, smooth empire boarding and "rustic" corner panes. The latest outstanding examples of wooden-classicism originate from beginning of 1860s.

Typical to the mid 19th century are modest 1-2 storey dwelling-houses of a massive proportions often laid on a high stone socle, with wide horizontal boarding and a simple-shaped high saddle-roof.

The most typical to the 1840-60s are the large two-storey side-to-street oriented dwelling-house, which in several modifications was used in different parts of town and one-storey wooden dwelling-house with wide horizontal boarding. This kind of house was quite common in the earlier wooden districts on the outskirts of town. Some of the Russian sloboda-like towards the street oriented one storey dwelling-houses still stand in Fortuuna Street.

The tradition of pre-modelled facades continued until the 1870s. From this period there are some larger 1,5 to 2,5 storey tenement-houses. Their abstract façade-shape still follows the neo-classical tradition, but the proportions have become ponderous and the details are modelled in a neo-Renaissance manner.

The golden age of Tartu wooden architecture was the second half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century – the age of the extensive growth of the wooden suburbs.

The following numbers provide precise data concerning wooden buildings:

In 1843, there were 973 dwelling-houses in Tartu, among them 175 of stone- and 788 of wood.

In 1897, there were 389 stone houses and 2258 wooden houses.

As we can see in the second half of the 19th century about 200 stone-houses and more than 1500 wooden houses were built, that is a ratio of six wooden houses for each stone house.

In the beginning of 20th century and until the Second World War the wooden building was strongly dominant.

In 1910, there were 584 stone houses, 160 houses of mixed materials, and 2381 wooden houses inside town limits and more than 600 in Tähtvere and Karlova suburbs outside town limits.

From the 1870s on the stylistic variations essential to the second half of the 19th century, came into fashion. There are two parallel existing main architectural trends.

First of these - the wooden neo-Renaissance - stands near to the earlier neo-Classical tradition, as it imitates the formal language of monumental architecture. Wooden elements and details on the façade more or less schematically imitate the elements of stone-building. The façade surface is divided into horizontal zones by cornices and belts and framed with the rhythm of pilasters and opening-surroundings. In the socle-zone and corner parts the decorative boarding often imitates rustic stone surfaces, window openings are covered with decorative pediments.

Many of that kind of representative wooden palaces were constructed in so-called German district between the town centre and railway-station – most of them burned down in 1941. Some existing examples from the beginning of 1880s stay in Veski street.

The other alternative stylistic trend in wooden architecture, even more popular in the 1870s and 1880s is known as Swiss style, in the 19th century it was usually called just wooden style - Holzbaustil. The style was based on the 19th century theoretical conception of material-genuineness and on the trend of the antiquity-romantics of 19th century German architects. Wooden architecture had to create its own architectural language based on its autonomous tradition.

The ideals were found in Swiss, as well in Tirolian and Bavarian rural cottages already admired by the earlier romantics for their rural genuineness in the first half of the century. In the same period the other vernacular forms of wooden architecture – Norwegian wooden churches and medieval cottages arouse interest of the professionals.

In Tartu, the Swiss style became a fashion in the 1870s. The first Swiss cottage was erected by the request of Prof. Alexander von Oettingen on his plot on Vallikraavi Street. Soon after that the local master builders educated in Germany followed the trend (the Prof. Reyhers dwelling-house at Vallikraavi street from 1875 by F.Hübbe (later remodelled), the cottages by F.Hübbe and M.Rötscher nr.8 and 11 at Õpetaja street, the von Kügelgens cottage No.5 at Näituse street by Otto Schröder from 1886. All of these had large hanging gables and verandas richly decorated with saw-cut ornaments.

The decorative forms of Swiss style were also used in large official buildings, like the German Craftsmen Society (1876) and university surgery-clinic from 1873-74, both by M.Rötscher, the clinic of mental diseases at Staadioni Street from 1878 by H.von Stavenhagen and the Tartu Railway Station built between 1876-1880.

In tenement-houses, both stylistic trends are usually mixed together. As in the case of the house Nr.121 on Narva Street, designed by F.Hübbe in 1883, the decorative details and roof-eave-construction recall Swiss style, while the division and rhythm of the façade is the neo-Renaissance.

There are some very interesting eclectic solutions designed by R.Guleke in 1890s. Guleke also designed a very attractive exhibition pavilion on Narva street for German Agricultural Society in 1893 (demolished in 1920s).

Some interesting wooden dwelling-houses with hanging gables and lot of decorative elements were designed by local master-builders Carl Bescht and Robert Pohlmann in 1890s, among them Bescht's own house on Narva street from 1895.

By the numerous two-storey wooden tenement-houses, erected in different districts according to the plans of local master-builders 3-4 main planning types are used. The size and appearance of the building depended of the owners' possibilities. The modest of them have only schematic division of façade-surfaces with simple details, while representative ones are expressively decorated with architectural details and elements.

Characteristic element for a dwelling-house in Tartu is the veranda, usually as a two-storey annex oriented towards the backyard. The obligatoriness of this element reflects the in Tartu deeply rooted garden-suburb-like way of life. As yard-side of the building opened usually towards a sufficiently spacious garden-plot, the veranda enabled one to enjoy the short summer period for a longer time.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the building activity in the suburbs increased once again. In about 1910, the new wooden areas on the outskirts of town were already replaced by streets and quarters.

The owners were mostly middle-class shopkeepers or peasants who had a chance to buy or rent plots in suburban area. A quickly built wooden tenement-house was a good

investment, as tenement-taxes were high enough to guarantee continuous income in the future.

In the case of tenement-houses frame-building construction prevailed, since this made possible to raise the buildings quickly and cheaply, with minor loss of quality materials. The carcass-frame was often filled with lower quality timber, such as parts of some burned or demolished houses. The constructions were tightened and covered with profiled boarding. Most of the buildings had good socles of brick and natural stone, the brick-laid fire-walls and tar-felt or plate roof.

The changing appearance of the buildings clearly reflects the aesthetic ideals of the time. From the mid 1900s the neo-Renaissance art façade-decorations and saw-cut ornaments become even more frequent and are replaced with typical Art Nouveau elements – the wavy-shaped window surroundings, arc-shaped door-openings and the decorative shape of doors and window-frames, decorative gable boarding and rafters.

On the earliest and most representative wooden dwelling-houses at nr. 17-29 Kastani Street which were designed and built by R. Pohlmann and W. Sternfeldt between 1903 and 1907 masters have used a highly decorative combination of saw-cut ornaments, decorative gables, profiled rafters, corner scaffolding and other elements typical to the previous period. The door openings, window surroundings and some of the wall ornaments are modelled in fine Art Nouveau shapes. The representative backyard buildings have romantic gable towers and fine glass verandas.

Another example is provided by a group of tenement houses at Lepiku Street, built between 1906-1909. The buildings are not as representative, but still solid, decorated with similar to each other façade elements, hanging gables and rafters, window frames and door openings, which gives the ensemble homogeneity. Two larger 10-flat houses in the end of the street, designed by building engineer Fromhold Kangro in 1909, are more modern, with simple-formed façade-gables and nicely ornamented window surroundings.

The bravest example of the turn-of the century wooden architecture in Tartu is the Karlova district. This wooden district of more than 300 mainly perimetral two storey tenement-houses arose outside of the town-limits in 5 years (between 1910 and 1914), the latest houses are from beginning of the 1920s. It is known by tradition, that the main building contractor and designer was building-engineer Fromhold Kangro, but most of the buildings were probably designed and built by local master-builders.

There are several buildings with mostly art nouveau decorated facades. The houses have a dismembered roof shape, dynamic silhouette, achieved using hanging polygonal eaves and a roof-towers, floral. The elements and details including window surroundings, doors and staircases are in simple formed but perfect Art Nouveau manner. Some of the buildings still have the painted interior decorations of the period.

The unique value of the district is the perfectly preserved townscape – the long half-perimetral housing-fronts dismembered with ponderous building shapes create a kind of restless and strange turn-of-the-century atmosphere.

In the 1920s-1930s, the wooden architecture was still dominant. The new town-parts Tammelinn and Tähtvere districts consist mainly of 1 to 2 storey plastered wooden buildings.

In Tammelinn, built between 1923 and 1930 the little mansard-roofed villa-like private houses predominate. In Tähtvere, built in the 1930s the leading building-type is the 2-storey functionalist dwelling-house with 2-4 solid flats.

From the second half of the 19th century a new type of wooden construction – carcass frame - spread alongside the traditional horizontal-beam. In the beginning of the 20th century it was mainly used in Karlova and other suburban districts in low-price tenement houses. Yet while high-quality timber was quite cheap the new construction did not supersede the traditional way of building. Carcass-frame was recognised as not an

honourable way of building and even in 1930s the better dwelling-houses were raised in nearly traditional way. So the tradition of horizontal-beam construction was still alive in the 1920s and 1930s and finally passed into oblivion in the post-war-period with the death of the old building masters.

In 1928, town-architect Arnold Matteus designed worker housing on Aardla Street in modern carcass-frame-construction. Yet this type of housing never won popularity in Tartu.

The traditional tenement house with 2-4 flats was still preferred. Before World War II there were about 4000 wooden buildings.

The development and transformation of wooden architecture proceeded through the gradual combination of innovations with former building traditions. Technical innovations (such as the development of wood-treating), changes in the room-structure, connected with the needs of representation, and changes in architectural appearance, distinguished by the changes in fashion and styles – the decorative methods of shaping of elements and details played their role in the genesis of buildings.

During the war the central town area was heavily damaged, but most of the the wooden suburbs remained. Despite some wooden dwelling-houses that were erected in 1940 and 1950s, the former building tradition started to die out in the post-war period. Probably the last traditional type of wooden building was the two-storey woodshed, last examples of which were built by old building masters in the 1960s and -70s. Since then, the tradition has completely died out.

1. The situation today

In fact, and quite curiously the Soviet system fostered the preservation of wooden suburbs. As they were proclaimed “rotten districts” the old buildings were not seriously reconstructed and so the historical appearance of the districts was preserved.

As a result we today have large well preserved historic areas with hundreds of splendid old wooden houses with original exteriors and details, but the truth is, that most of the buildings are in relatively bad condition.

Recently the situation has changed. Most of the buildings have been returned to the private owners. Very few of them still recognise their roots in the old buildings. The lack of a good tradition of building maintenance is still a problem. There is insufficient interest, motivation and resources to maintain the historic buildings.

Most of the owners are interested in selling the houses or flats. Sometimes the only interest is the plot in the downtown area and the houses are left in disrepair, in the hope of obtaining the demolition licence.

In better cases the owners still wish to reconstruct the buildings, but usually they mean to gain there comfort with quick solutions and the most low-priced modern materials.

The 1990s brought a boom of modern materials, plastic windows and facades etc. Advertisement makes people believe, it's the easiest and cheapest way to bring comfort (in fact it really is!).

Regrettably, the reconstruction of historical buildings according to the modern building standards means, that the buildings inevitably lose most of their historical significance in details and as a result of this process the historical milieu of the old town parts as whole will get more and more lost.

Often even the relatively well-preserved old building-constructions are replaced or covered with the modern ones, witch are not only ugly but also unhealthy for the old structures and will effort later damages.

Our arguments to the contrary are still too weak, any official reports against it have not been published.

There are in fact no state and municipal programs to help and the owners who care for their buildings are left alone with their problems.

Local town-planners have not yet recognised that the preservation of the appearance of historical districts and buildings is part of their job. They are not interested in this kind of work and have left this area without any control.

Moreover - the stereotype that old wooden districts have to make room for modern buildings continues to live on in their heads. According to the latest proposal for perspective plan of Supilinn, about 60% of historical housing should be demolished and the quarters and large plots with gardens should be filled with modern dwelling-houses. Since the inhabitants were against this kind of solution, it has not been enacted.

As a result of this, every year tens of historical buildings are destroyed or fall into disrepair and even more of them are spoiled by inappropriate reconstruction. In few years, several previously well-preserved town parts have lost their authenticity. I'm afraid their decay will follow the same pattern in the coming years.

There are of course already some remarkable positive trends, so as some owners and inhabitants of the historic town-areas have started to recognise the environment and apologise the town parts they live in. Probably this trends will win after some years, but will it not be too late then?

2. Inventory of Tartu suburbs and the attempts of preservation

In 1995-1997 about 800 buildings were inventoried in 6 historical districts of Tartu. The buildings were divided into 3 categories according to their architectural, milieu- and/or historical significance and into 3 grades according to their physical condition. The main characteristics and elements of each building were described on inventory lists, the buildings were documented photographically and a database was established.

As a result of the inventory 4 local conservation areas – Tammelinn, Karlova, Toometagune, Tähtvere - were established and proposals for the preservation of some other town-areas (Supilinn, Ülejõe) were made. Unfortunately, the town government later lost interest to this field of work and real preservation work has not been successful.

At the moment about 100 separate historical wooden buildings, among them the building groups on Kastani, Lepiku and Emajõe Streets are on the heritage list. This is still only a fraction of the roughly 2000 existing historical wooden buildings. The proposal of taking the central part of the Karlova wooden suburb under state protection remains undecided.

3. Conclusions:

As long as the historical town-parts are not protected by law and the reconstruction of historical buildings is not controlled, it will be difficult to effect any changes in the described trends.

If we are not able to make the owners and municipality interested in maintaining their buildings and wooden districts the sad perspective is the progressive decay of this heritage. The only possible way to awaken interest could be a carefully planned policy, that would economically promote the conservation of old buildings and the use of suitable technologies and materials.

This does not, unfortunately, appear to be one of our country's political priorities.

The main problems today are:

How to avoid the further decay of our wooden suburbs?

How to curb the stereotypes? How to open the eyes of owners and municipalities?

How can the area-preservation be co-ordinated through town planning?

What are the municipality's tasks?

Any good experience or possibilities for obtaining help?

First of all, there is needed a good experience of town planning in some historical district and a live examples for the careful reconstruction of a wooden houses with all technical solutions and according to contemporary use.