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A rural social condenser.**The collective farm of Nākotne as an asset and a challenge**

Abstract

Currently, the Soviet regime and collective lifestyle can be seen only in the retrospective. The strong physical facts of these practices lost their meaning and utility, however, continue to dominate the present materiality of the Post-Soviet context. The article questions the successful example of Soviet collectivist architecture in the context of the relevant discourse over the complex built form. Nākotne (Latvia) is an exceptional case of the Soviet collective farm, where the contribution of the chairman and chief architect broke the neutrality between the Soviet ideology and the formal design through the innovative vision. Specifically, the Sports and Culture Centre of Nākotne is analyzed as a social condenser, which can be considered both a challenge and an asset for the issues of contemporary architectural discourse.

Keywords

Collective farm — Rural architecture — Complex buildings

New collectivism of Soviet Latvia

Conventionally, the Soviet epoch is known as a time of reformation. However, it cannot be denied that it was an era of new formulations that from the perspective of unconventional conceptions which emerged in response to the ideological request of the State. This fact is illustrated by a variety of innovative built forms. The phenomenon of a collective farm, so-called *kolkhoz*, stands in the middle of this discourse. This typology is a bright example of Soviet invention, rather than a result of gradual development, a physical manifestation of the State's ideology written on the blank front of unclaimed land.

Initially, the territory of Soviet Latvia was characterized by the distinction between urban and rural. The outskirts of major cities here were covered with single farmsteads (Bell et alii 2019). However, for the State, the claiming of the Latvian rural land was highly promising from an economic perspective. Besides, the introduction of collective farms in this context was both a tool to affirm Soviet power and the outcome of it. At the physical level, the town and countryside had to be brought to the common denominator, following the standardization promoted by the Socialist principles (Drémaitė 2017). Inserted into the countryside, the collective farms were established in a network around the large urban settings significantly changing the rural landscape (Melluma 1994). Semi-urban settlements were created, based on the needs of industrial production. However, the standardization was operating also at the social level, following the Marxist ideas¹ (Meyer 1931). Thus, collective farms were not planned to act as “industrial apparatus”; Instead, introduced settlements were considered a stage for new a collectivism, where a sense of belonging to the Socialist

doctrines had to be established. In this context, farmers were appropriated and activated the place, resulting in an ambiguous conditions. On the one hand, growing repressions made people join the kolkhozes “deliberately”. On the other hand, to attract owners of smallholdings, settlements were designed with modern amenities for a comfortable life, often found in the cities (Kalm 2009). Thus, the duality of the formation processes resulted in the duality of the result. The urban settlements placed in the middle of the agricultural landscape created a hermetic environment in which a new form of collectivity was shaped. Therefore, the collective farm was seen as both an urban form and a way of collective living, which was mainly represented in the architectural dimension.

While it would be true to say that any invention requires a decision, arguably also sacrifices, the question is if the outcome can justify the action, once decontextualized from its specific position in space and time.

At the time, the Soviet State established a system where living and production were connected in a single cycle. The public sector was crucial as a mediator between the two and served as a principal scene for ideological formation. With the collapse of the State, industrial and residential structures were still in demand. However, the public building reflecting the concept of “collective living” went to misuse or neglect. Considering that the social sphere and the material forms are deeply interrelated, it would be worth asking: from the contemporary perspective, what lesson can be learned from the exemplary cases of seemingly retrograde collectivist settings?

Chairman, innovative vision and the Nākotne collective farm

The town of Nākotne was the first case of the collective farm in Latvia. It was established in November 1946, 65km far from Riga, following the efforts of the Latvia Soviet Socialist Republic (Būmane 1986). After the proclamation of independence in the Baltic Countries in 1991, the settlement suffered stagnation. However, in terms of both the layout and architecture, Nākotne is a unique example of the collective settlement and lifestyle. The exceptional nature of the settlement is grounded in the refusal of conventional formal standardization by the leaders of the farm.

The success of the settlement and the beginning of its urban and economic growth can be traced back to 1966, with the appointment of Arturs Čikste to the position of chairman. The family of Čikste was one among 11 others establishing Nākotne. Starting as a houseboy Arturs' Čikste eventually turned into a successful public figure recognized at a variety of levels. In 1947, he was elected leader of the Communist Youth League and in 1949, awarded the title of Socialist Labor Hero. Consequently, in 1950, after becoming a member of the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR and the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, he joined the Communist Party (Būmane 1986). These acquired positions allowed relative freedom in managing the farm and guaranteed access to experimental approaches in defining the setting of the Nākotne.

The position of Arturs Čikste as chairman of Nākotne has never been neutral. Instead, it was based on the quintessence of personal and professional experiences, driven by the desire to innovate. Firstly, the disciplinary organization of the collective farm was redirected. Čikste decided to step above the mere production of agricultural crops, which was set as the only industrial activity of Nākotne from 1946 to 1966. Even though expansion of the variety of products was a risk, it ultimately justified itself in gener-

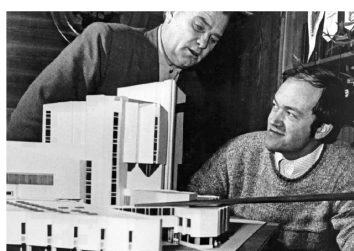


Fig. 1
Arturs Čikste (left), Henrikas Šilgalis (right) and the model of the theatre of the Culture House for 800 people. 1970s.

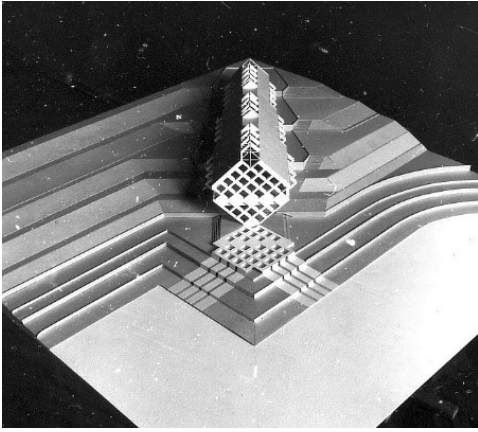


Fig. 2 a-b

Henrikas Kestutis Šilgalis, Model of the proposal for a cultural center, early 1980s (left); Model of a private house in Caucasus, 1980 (right).

ating significant economic growth and making the farm operate as a diversified capitalist agriculture apparatus (Marsden et al. 1986). Secondly, referring to the social perspective, a system tangential to the one typical of the Soviet State was established. In contrast to other collective farms, in Nākotne personal and cultural freedom was not limited. Besides, the possibility of private property and a sufficient salary were offered. It created a high demand for the position in the settlement. Finally, with the consciousness of the rules of strategic development, Arturs Čikste selected only the most qualified candidates to join Nākotne. It largely contributed to the innovation of local facilities, which started to be realized, combining functionality and modern aesthetic vision.

In 1967, led by the search for further development ideas, Arturs Čikste visited the exhibition of young Lithuanian architects in Vilnius. The project of young yet experienced Henrikas Kestutis Šilgalis (1944–2007) raised the particular interest of the chairman. Thus, Šilgalis was invited to become the chief architect of Nākotne (1968 to 1979) [Fig. 1].

As a rule, the collective farm was designed through physical, but also political reality. The chairman was the executive power of the Soviet State carrying the architecture and urban layout capable of assuming explicit economic, productive, social, and representative responsibility. In the case of Nākotne, the collective farm was a physical manifestation of the design process dependent both on the client and the implementor, due to a mutually respectful collaboration between the chairman and the architect.

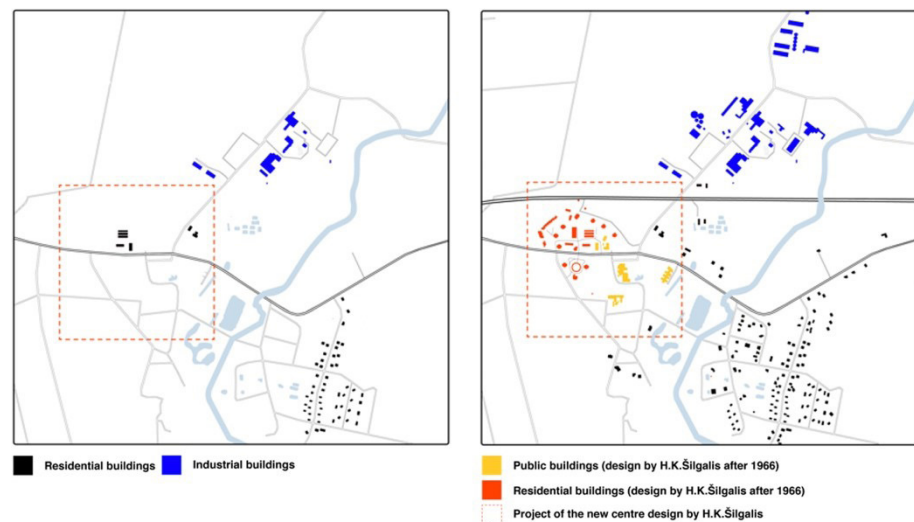
The dissident architect of the Nākotne

Henrikas Šilgalis was given an opportunity to construct his projects at an early age with the help of Algimantas Mačiulis (1931), the head of the Institute of Public Utility Design in Vilnius (Mačiulis 2009). It had an important impact on the Šilgalis formation, strongly influenced by modernist architecture, particularly, the sculptural expressiveness of Le Corbusier. Henrikas Šilgalis refused the technical minimalism and the modernist spirit, which was the dominating architectural doctrine in the Soviet Baltic Countries in the 1960s (Dremaite 2017). He believed that this kind of minimal simplicity did not allow to inter-relate in a single architectural layout the specific functional programs closely linked to the architectural form. According to his colleague, Leonardas Vaitys, Henrikas Šilgalis postulated that public buildings had not only to suffice the functional needs but also fulfill the representative and symbolic role of the local community (Vaitys 2003).

The collective farm of Nākotne ultimately became a testing ground for Šilgalis' experimentation in establishing a personal approach in the middle

Fig. 3

The urban structure of Nākotne in the early 1950s (left) and after 1966 (right).



of the architectural discipline. Given a larger artistic freedom in testing avant-garde ideas, the architect could ultimately define a personal style suitable for the cultural context of his time [Fig. 2].

**Fig. 4**

Masterplan of the centre of Nākotne, 1966; yellow – public buildings; black – residential buildings. Source: Glūda parish archive

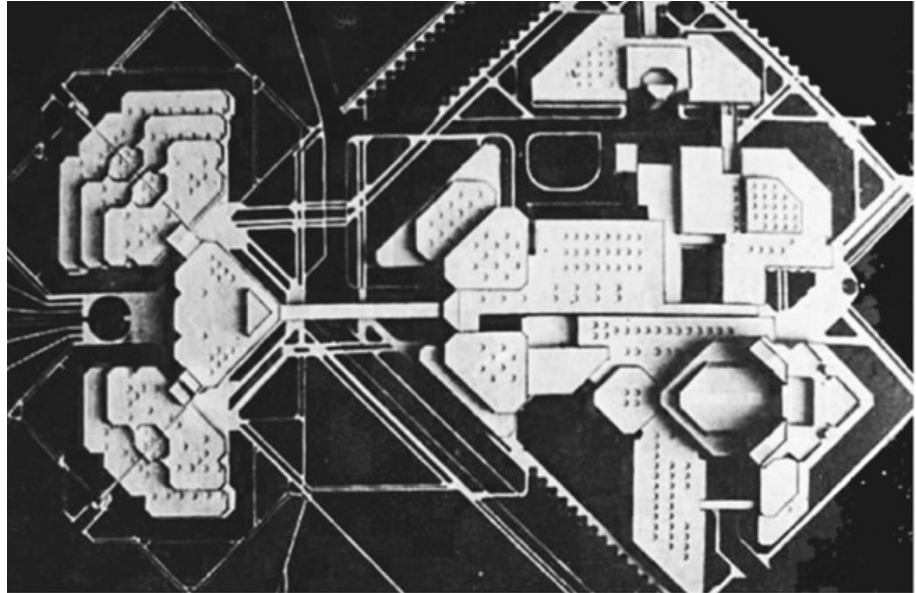
The masterplan of the centre of Nākotne

Šilgalis designed the master plan for the center of Nākotne in the late 1960s when the collective farm had already existed for 20 years. In this context, architecture was a result and catalyst of the social and economic prosperity of the farm. Before the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940, the area of Nākotne was characterized by a network of single farmsteads in the context of overlapping urban and natural systems such as the river Auce and clusters of forests. The initial Soviet collectivization model, established in 1946, was not focused on the internal organization of the settlement, but rather on the fact of the establishment itself (Dremaite 2017). Soviet planning did not create a unitary system. It resulted in a dispersed urban pattern and stagnant development. Addressing the issues posed by the setting, Šilgalis proposed the new residential and public zone of the settlement. In the 1960s he proposed a circular spatial organization as a new centrality [Fig. 3], capable to unify the pre-existing elements of the site. Once united by the introduced focal point, the collective farm started to operate as a complete mesh of relationships, where the elements could change but remained connected in a system of meanings.

The proposed master plan (Fig. 4) for the central core of the settlement was inspired by structuralist thought (Söderqvist 2010). The functional clusters of residential and public facilities were set in a radial dialogue with each other, immersed in the landscape. Living blocks were located in a separate zone, offering ample private space. Thus, the community in Nākotne expressed itself in a balance between privacy and collectivity. Each building of the scheme was designed as a free-standing element within unprogrammed natural matter. Thus, the public facility was not a physical, but meaningful centrality of the spatial composition.

Sports and Culture Centre: a monumental dominant of the settlement

In the context of the master plan proposed by Šilgalis, the Sports and Culture Centre (1967) played the protagonist's role [Fig. 5]. Rather than mimetically adapting to its surroundings, the intervention undertook a full representative character as a monumental dominant. The structure consisted of self-sufficient polyvalent units, creating two distinct environ-

**Fig. 5**

Henrikas Kestutis Šilgalis with the model of the Sports and Culture Centre, the drawing of masterplan of Nākotne in the background, late 1960s (left); the model of the Sports and Cultural, 1968 (right).

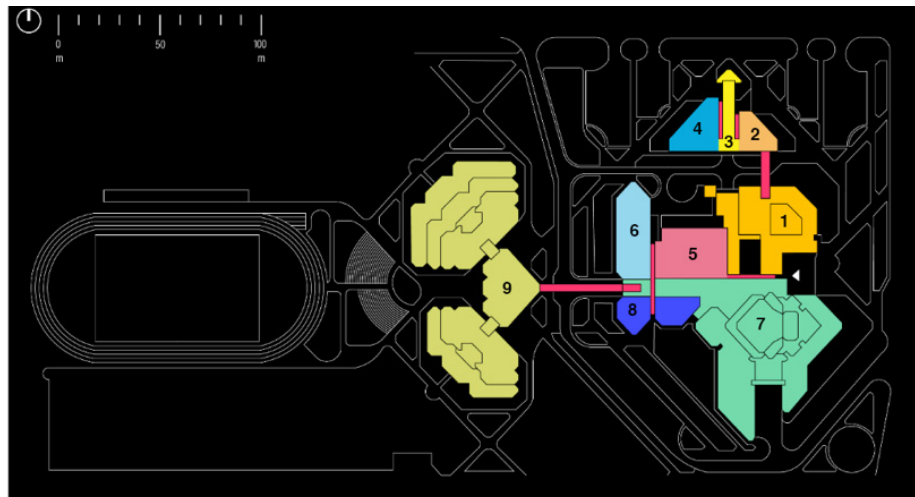
ments: the representative exterior and functional interior. The notion of multifunctionality which served the community rendered the building the social condenser. This concept was developed in the theoretical and then practical work of the Russian constructivists in the 1920s (Meriggi 2014). Meanwhile, according to this vision, the spatial organization could be a dual catalyst of positive and negative aspects of community and individuality. Later, the concept was also adopted by Guido Canella, particularly in the design of public buildings, where seemingly non-compatible functions were complementing each other. Importantly, these experimental layouts were generating a sense of community and unexpected encounters (Chizzoniti 2020).

In the case of Nākotne Sports and Culture Centre, multi-functionality was addressed purely through the architectural composition of the complex. Here, social, cultural, and administrative functions were not merely grouped in relation to each other. Instead, the functionality and accessibility were generated by the combination of different units within the single structure [Fig. 6]. Such a building was characterized by an outstanding level of complexity, performing both as a tool for shaping a community and as an asset responding to essential social needs, providing equal access to the users. The general scheme was organized on a square plan rotated by 45 degrees with two main distribution axes [Fig. 7]. All programmatic activities were connected through the passages guiding the user flows. While the main axis was clearly outlined, the separate units could be accessed from individual entrances. This autonomy was predetermined by the intricate scheme of the Sports and Culture Centre itself. Considering the unprecedented dimension of the complex, which had to be constructed in several stages, each programmatic unit was designed as autonomous.

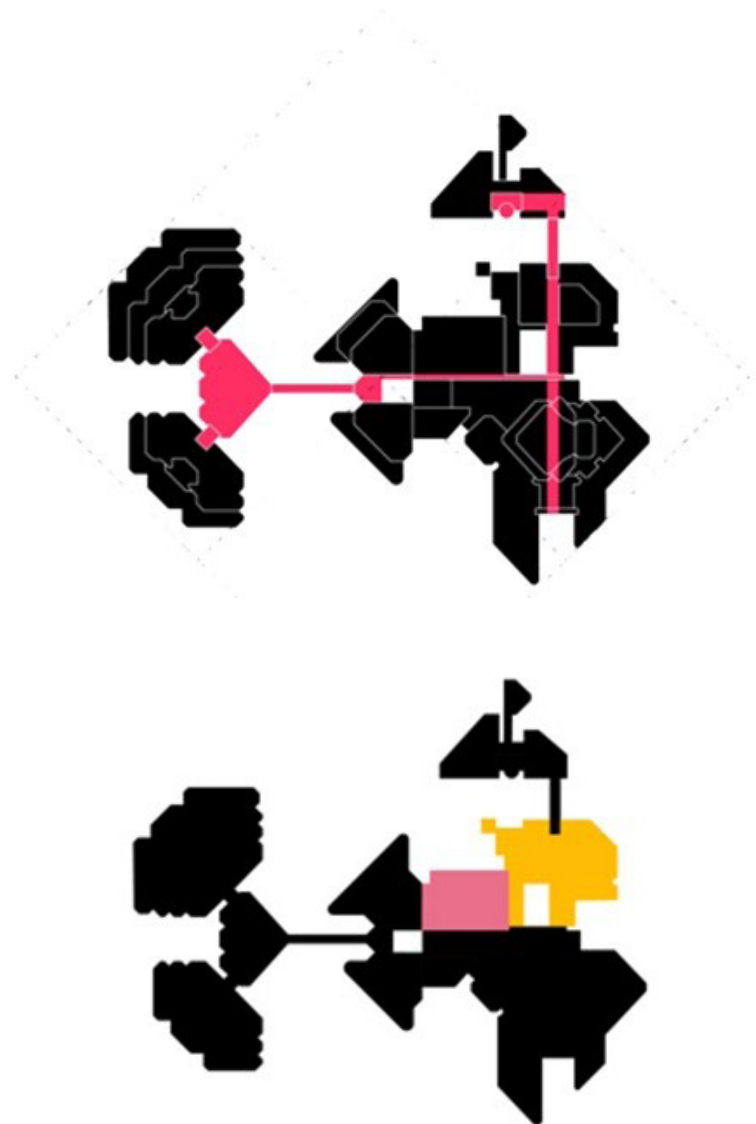
The central block consisted of interrelated functions such as administration, cultural center, sports hall, swimming pool, and canteen. The high school, kindergarten, post office, and ambulatory were placed in separate units. This spatial separation suggests that the unit was not universal but provisioned for a specific group of users. The main axis concluded with the stadium with semi-circular seating looking at the vast arable lands behind. It creates a structure without a “backside”, but also without the central square. Instead of a central gathering space, several semi-courtyards were

Fig. 6

Scheme of Sports and Culture Centre designed by Algimantas Mačiulis and Henrikas Kęstutis Šilgalis (1967); 1 Administration Building; 2 Post Office; 3 Kindergarten and Library; 4 Ambulatory / Hospital; 5 Sports Hall 35 * 18 m; 6 Swimming Pool; 7 Culture Palace; 8 Cafe and Canteen; 9 High School. (Redrawn by authors)

**Fig. 7**

Scheme of the main axis of Sports and Education Centre (left); constructed parts of sports hall (pink); administrative part currently housing with the library and school (yellow) (right). (Redrawn by authors)



carved as subtracts from the initial square scheme. Thus, the outdoor space was permeating the building. This suggests the total use of the spaces, rather than one focal point for the activity within the building.

Post-Soviet: the collective farm of Nākotne as an asset and a challenge

With the collapse of the Socialist State, the utopia of collective farms began to act as a heterotopia of collective living. Nākotne was able to exist under the Soviet regime in Latvia where the settlement and industry were merged into a single organism, providing a type of self-sufficiency. With the change of regime and subsequent dissolution of the collective living in the periphery, structures such as the Sports and Cultural Center of Nākotne lost not only their meaning but also their strategic importance. The current tendencies demonstrate that public services are concentrated in major urban centers. It results in a two-fold problem. From one perspective, the issues are related to urban-rural mobility. On the other, the current economic system is rarely capable of running architectural objects of this scale in the context of temporarily isolated rural settlements (Hatherley 2015). While collective farms were generally neglected as a phenomenon related to specific manifestation and temporality, some examples contain valuable historic lessons. The case of Nākotne highlights the role of the client and architect in the development process: it questions the relationship between those two actors in the creation of prosperous architectural discourse. Henrikas Šilgalis' vision was formulated after an in-depth understanding of the program and requirements of the chairman, Arturs Čikste. Consequently, the client provided knowledge of the social and political context and financial support, as essential tools for successful development. The core of this collaboration was grounded around the clearly defined roles, personal contributions, and input of each actor in the project. As a result, the exclusive system of development was created, where architectural ideas aimed to support collectivist thought were enhanced by the specificity of the development processes. Thus, a specific precedent has been created, where the neutrality in the combination between the ideology and the formal shaping has been interrupted, as enriched by the innovative architectural vision. By refusing fashionable architecture doctrines of the time, Henrikas Šilgalis established a role of individualist and nonconformist whose design process was driven by a search for personal handwriting (Vaytis 2003). The case of the collective farm Nākotne proves that an issue of "style" is as important as functional needs in the contemporary architectural discourse. The combination of the two aspects led to the creation of a unique built complex that shaped the identity of the place and the community of Nākotne.

The recent healthcare crisis has pointed out the need for inclusivity at both social and physical levels. The privatization of the public space by different social groups has led to selective exclusion practices. There is an emerging need in generating a broader discussion over the strategic accessibility of the social space, balanced between integration and diversification, which is at the core of contemporary complexity discourse (Landman 2020). Meanwhile, the society of urban lifestyles and amenities still longs for proximity to nature to maintain mental and physical balance (Nigrelli 2021). In this context, the complex building framework of the collective farm of Nakotne could be relevant in the ability to orient the social behavior through the programmatic setting of the natural and built structure.

Nakotne poses several site-specific open-ended questions. However, from the contemporary perspective, it can be considered both a challenge and an asset for the issues of architectural discourse.

Notes

¹ Architecture was not considered «the art of building», «not an act of composition dictated by feeling», rather a science, «an act of premeditated organization». «The building itself is not a work of art. Its size is determined by the dimensions and functions of its program and not by the shallow pathos of any trimmings». Only the «diminution of the multiplicity of standard elements» would guarantee the elevation of the discourse to its “highest form» as an «indication of the steady socialization of life in the mass».

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