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**Rural modernization in Lithuania in 1950s-1980s:
from functionalist agrocities to regionalist approach**

Abstract

The modernist post-war spatial organisation and territorial planning was a strictly hierarchical network, guided by the principle of development from the centre to the periphery and best revealed through an examination of regional planning, the functional zoning, and the urbanisation of rural areas. This paper presents a vast environmental-territorial transformation of rural Lithuania under the Soviet occupation period in 1940-1990, during which the forced collectivisation of agriculture resulted in new territorial development. As a reaction to functionalist approach, the regionalist trends were started to be manifested in late 1970s.

Keywords

Rural modernization — Regional planning — Modern Lithuania

Introduction: regional planning and rural modernization

The urbanisation and industrialisation of the Soviet occupied Baltic republics – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – in 1940–1990 had significant socio-economic consequences. It was precisely at this time that the economic development network encompassing the long-term industrial and territorial growth plans emerged.

Rural urbanisation brought tremendous change to the provincial landscape of Lithuania. After the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania in 1940, one of the first issues to be addressed was the land nationalization, agricultural reform and forced collectivization. This forced restructuring of agricultural sector directly impacted nearly 70 per cent of the Lithuanian population with land holdings. The process had two clear ideological vectors: the elimination of single-family farmsteads as the backbone of private property, and the Communist Party's goal of bridging the city and the rural village. In 1947, the Communist Party adopted a resolution *On the Construction of Collective Farms in the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian Soviet Socialist Republics*, including a provision calling for model collective farms to be outfitted with modern technology to promote the collectivisation ideology among the farming community. By 1952, nearly 93.8 per cent of Lithuania's rural population (encompassing 343,200 privately held farms) (Butkevičius 1980, pp. 9–10) had been forcefully consolidated into collective farms, prompting the Lithuanian Communist Party's Seventh Congress to proclaim the successful end of collectivisation in Soviet Lithuania.

However, Soviet collectivisation was met with popular discontent and resistance. As a result, only a few model communities were constructed in this period, largely for propaganda purposes. The challenge then became

the mass construction of agricultural settlements. Schemes were drawn up for zoning and locating major agricultural facilities, followed by the approval of general and detailed settlement plans and the adoption of designs for industrial centres and their location.

From 1959 to 1964, the Lithuanian Regional Economic Council was established and produced a *Long-Term Scheme for the Urban Development and Distribution of Industry* that outlined the location of industrial facilities, the construction of rural settlements, the laying of roads, the proper use of water resources, and the resolution of matters pertaining to urbanisation and agricultural restructuring (Drémaitė 2017, pp. 116–145). By 1960, a *Planning Methodology for Rural Districts* (directed by architect Steponas Stulginskis) was prepared for the entire republic and was later used as the basis for regional planning schemes. Between 1967 and 1991, nearly 115,000 of the family farmsteads owned privately prior to Second World War were disbanded, and by 1983, 64 per cent of Lithuania's rural population was living within the jurisdiction of collective farm settlements (Vėlyvis 2000, pp. 25–31). By 1975, Lithuania had 3,089 rural settlements, divided into two categories: central (1,542) and secondary (1,547) (Butkevičius 1980, p. 99).

Two central architectural questions continued to be present throughout the entire period of rural urbanisation. The first had to do with the house typology of the collective farmer: single-family homes (with a small, adjoining farm) or collective arrangements? Another important issue was the architecture of new collective farm settlements and the functions such centres needed to serve. In this regard, opinions changed radically – shifting from the mechanical transplanting of urban structures to rural communities to a revival of regional ethnographic foundations and the embrace of postmodernist experimentation.

The 1960s: urban standards for rural settlements

Rural urbanisation progressed nearly exclusively through the process of forced collectivisation. Ideologically, *kolkhoz* (collective farm) and *sovkhov* (Soviet farm) settlements were meant to constitute a new, Soviet, way of life. Each new *kolkhoz* settlement was subdivided into functional zones: a town centre, a residential area, and zones for agricultural industry. However, residents were gradually abandoning the new Soviet villages impoverished by collectivisation, and well-trained agricultural specialists were also in severely short supply. Thus during Soviet Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev's modernisation in the late 1950s, proposals were made to bring urban comforts to the rural environment to attract the necessary talent. He proposed the replacement of millions of villages with agro-cities of 10,000 inhabitants (Pallot 1993, pp. 211–231). The *Zarya Kommunizma* (Dawn of Communism) agro-city, built in 1961 near Moscow, was presented as a model town.

According to a new programme, all *kolkhoz* settlements were to be categorised as either central (with consolidated infrastructure, an administrative centre, and housing for collective farm employees), secondary (residential communities engaged solely in collective farm activity), or non-developable (with residents to be transferred to a central settlement). The development scheme for the Lithuanian SSR envisioned 2,200 prospective settlements (with 1,150 designated as central and more than 1,000 as secondary) and 1,300 non-developable communities (Drémaitė 2017, pp. 116–145). [Fig. 1]

**Fig. 1**

Photo of model kolkhoz settlement Dainava, A. Palionis, 1974 (Source: Lithuanian Central State Archives)

What followed was the most extreme period of Soviet rural urbanisation. Individual family farming plots were abolished, families were prohibited from keeping domestic animals, and the construction of urban-style apartment blocks began, fundamentally changing the population's relationship with the surrounding environment.

The Dainava experimental settlement, built for 1,000 residents on the Leonpolis Soviet Poultry Farm in central Lithuania (architects Virginijus Šimkus, Ramūnas Kamaitis, Algimantas Staskevičius, 1965–1969) did indeed develop into a model *agro-city*, meant to showcase the Lithuanian village of the future. It was designed to follow a modern *city-like* settlement principle: terrain was levelled to accommodate an administrative centre with public buildings, including the first shopping centre to be built in a Lithuanian village. A 3,2-hectare park was established next to the settlement and all roads were paved. A completely new feature for a village community was the introduction of collective gardening plots, instead of individual plots near houses.

Dainava's central square was ringed by multi-unit 2 and 3-story panel apartment blocks. Outbuildings were also located within a specific pattern: once the apartment buildings had been constructed, it was no longer feasible to arrange service buildings in the traditional fashion, so one large single-story service structure with individual storage rooms for each apartment was constructed some 200–300 metres from the residential zone. [Fig. 2] As in cities, individual automobile garages were consolidated into one large parking building. Privately held animals were also housed on one common farm. This separation of zones was considered extremely progressive from a hygienic and sanitary standpoint, but it was received particularly negatively by residents because of its inconvenience.

Dainava was an extreme example of a period of intensive socialist agricultural reform and a policy of *transplanting the city to the village*. Although it received the USSR State Prize for its design in 1971, such an experiment provoked corresponding reactions. It became clear during the construction of the Dainava settlement that urban-style apartment blocks were not suitable for agricultural workers in need of roomier kitchens, cellars, and outbuildings. Therefore, a series of single-story brick houses with adjoining farming plots soon arose near the Dainava park.

The 1970s: the pursuit of regional individuality

In 1967, critique began to be targeted at the issue of the uniform appearance of new rural settlements and the fact that these new rural communities differed little from their urban counterparts. They were criticised for being *architecturally cold, and lacking the cosiness characteristic of rural villages* (Kalmykova 1968, pp. 15–22). From an ideological point of view,

the criticism gradually introduced the idea that modern Soviet rural settlements need not replicate urban mass housing estates, but should also not be copies of the old style of peasant villages. The challenge, then, was to design a new type of rural settlement.

New political resolutions called for the modernisation of the central part of settlements through the addition of cultural and consumer facilities, diversified housing for farmers (in contrast to standard two- or three-storey panel buildings), and the prioritisation of design and construction in rural urbanisation. The national republics were encouraged to take the initiative in this process and in 1968 rural settlement planning was devolved to local, republic-level institutions (such as the Collective Farm Construction Design Institutes in Estonia, established in 1966, and Lithuania, established in 1968). Regional architectural competitions and conferences were launched and the first Soviet-wide review of *kolkhoz* architectural designs was organised, encouraging construction of experimental settlements to serve as pilot projects for the future.

From the mid-1970s into the 1980s, the Soviet Baltic republics (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) experienced a period of solid growth in their agrarian economies. Newly affluent collective and state farms began to develop new housing and an emerging competition among *kolkhoz* chairmen helped foster innovative architectural designs and garden-city urban planning (Kalm 2009, pp. 128–147). It was also a field for young architects with attitude, who enthusiastically began to implement their ideas. An increasing number of homes were built using custom designs, while expressive administrative, cultural, and domestic service complexes began to appear, complemented by scenic landscaping. This radically different ideology is perfectly illustrated by the title of an article written by Lithuanian architect: *Protect our villages from urban structures!* (Šešelgis 1984, p. 4).

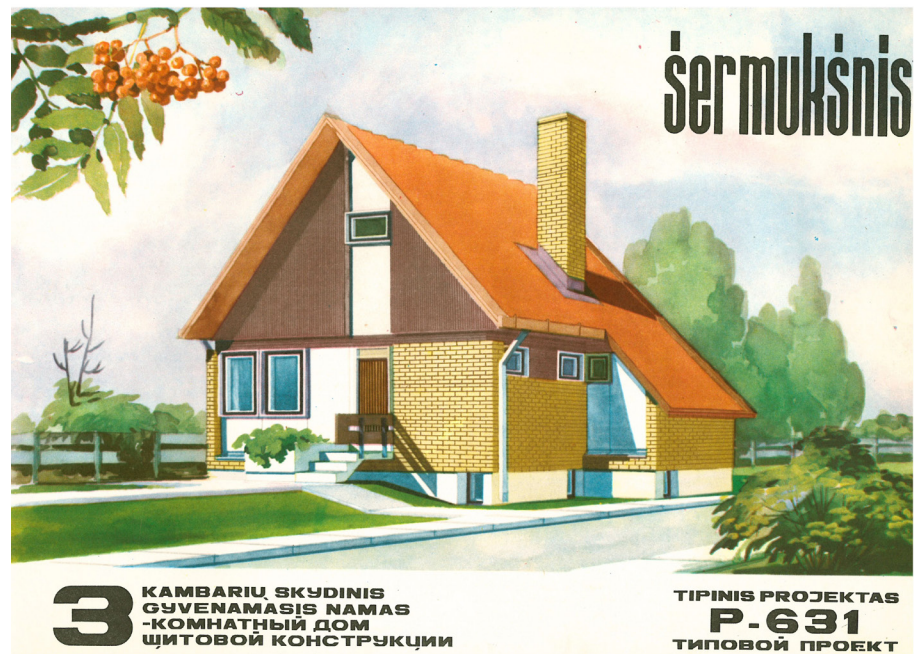
A plenary session of the Soviet Communist Party in 1978 provided another important impetus for the acceleration in the construction of single-family homes. The meeting reaffirmed the belief that well-trained specialists in agriculture could be drawn to work in rural areas by the assurance of better living conditions. This ideology was soon reflected in the so-called *Alytus House* produced by the Alytus Experimental Home Construction Factory in Southern Lithuania, which produced a traditionally looking wooden frame panel houses. It can be seen as perfect compromise between the challenge of restoring single-family homes in rural settlements and the strict requirements imposed on construction industrialisation and assembly. [Fig. 3, 4]

The late 1970s: Garden-city Experiments

A truly Soviet Lithuanian style of collective farming community began to emerge in the mid-1970s and early 1980s – modern settlements that were anchored in the surrounding landscape and closely associated with hybrid regional architectural details. In 1974–1975, free-standing single-family homes comprised 60 per cent of all residential housing in the Lithuanian SSR (Butkevičius 1980, p. 105). An increasing number of homes were built using custom designs, while new and expressive administrative, cultural and domestic service complexes began to appear, complemented by scenic landscaping. Designers began to apply various different architectural approaches: exploiting the natural local terrain, avoiding right angle street intersections, and creating different types of designs for residential housing (including semi-detached and terraced buildings). Planners were

Fig. 2

Design for the single-family rural house 'Šermukšnis' (Rowan) by Alytus factory (Source: A Catalogue Skydiniai namai – 76, Vilnius, 1976)

**Fig. 3**

Design for the single-family rural house 'Šermukšnis' (Rowan) by Alytus factory (Source: A Catalogue Skydiniai namai – 76, Vilnius, 1976)

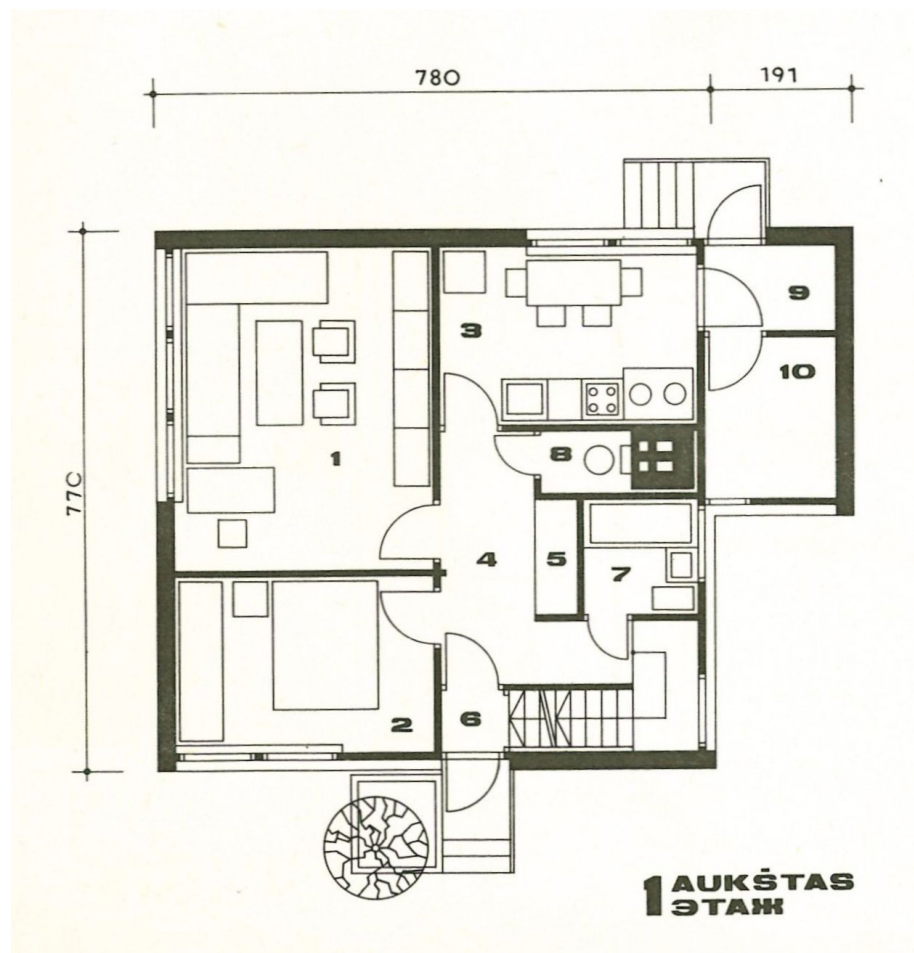




Fig. 4

Aerial view of Juknaičiai garden-settlement, 1980s (Source: Zigmantas Dokšas, Juknaičiai, 1986)

encouraged to build new settlements on the territory of existing villages, taking advantage of the available historical heritage.

The management system of Soviet Lithuania's prosperous collective farming network can be described as a unique amalgam of the collective farmers' serf-like dependence on the estate, a 19th-century paternalist industrial town hierarchy (led by an all-powerful collective farm chairman), and collective farming methods (the *communal pot* approach). More productive and prosperous *kolkhoz* chairmen began competing in the construction of administrative and cultural centres. A new feature on the rural landscape was the introduction of a full-time official architect, evidence of a constant state of new construction and increasing architectural aspirations.

One symbolic location, the result of a convergence of initiatives by an active chairman and the architectural characteristics of late modernism and regionalism, was the model community of Juknaičiai, central settlement of the *sovkhos* in the western Lithuania. An ambitious new chairman, Zigmas Dokšas, had aspirations to create a unique environment to promote the community's welfare. The custom plan for the layout of the Juknaičiai settlement and park, devised in 1974, played a significant role in reinforcing in rural architecture such innovations as the synthesis of landscape architecture and monumental sculpture. At the collective farm chairman's invitation, the community's buildings and park were finished with works by famous Lithuanian artists, the administration added new posts for an in-house architect and designer, and the chairman initiated the construction of custom-designed residential buildings, based on the experience he gained while travelling abroad.

**Fig. 5**

Design for an 8-apartment house in Juknaičiai, architect Stanislovas Kalinka, 1980 (Source: Vilnius Regional State Archives).

The settlement included non-standard one and a half and two and a half-story homes, with apartments laid out over two levels (designed by Edmundas Vičius); eight-unit apartment houses (by Stanislovas Kalinka); fluidly designed, red brick community buildings, covered in sloping tiled roofs; and a retirement home with an enclosed layout reminiscent of a monastery. A water tower served as the settlement's principle vertical landmark, with a small red-tile roof and weather vane typical for the region. Its wellness centre, masquerading officially as a sauna and laundry, resembled a church and adjoining monastery (designed by Kalinka in 1977).

Its unique architectural approach made Juknaičiai one of the most visited model collective farms in the entire USSR. After receiving accolades at a Soviet-wide review, in 1988, Juknaičiai became the first and only *kolkhoz* to receive the coveted Lenin Prize for its architecture, generating increased public interest in the settlement – not only for its innovative style, but also because of the changing values taking hold in rural settlement architecture. [Fig. 5, 6]

Conclusion

Important factors to consider in assessing the exceptional nature of rural planning in the Baltic republics was the relatively late start of their forced Sovietisation in 1940 and the continued influence of traditional ways of farming and living on individual farmsteads. The growth of the agricultural economy and the architectural aspirations of the younger generation of planners from the 1960s to the 1980s were the principle drivers of the emerging spatial and cultural landscape in the Lithuanian countryside. Although Baltic rural communities were constructed in accordance with Soviet directives, they nevertheless developed certain unique features: a socially motivated, personalised approach to a variety of residential forms, the development of original settlement administrative centres combining elements of modernist and regional architecture, and landscape design.

From 1950s to late 1980s the rural architecture in the Baltic republics shifted from monotonous communities and rows of farming plots to ambitious architectural complexes. Estonian architectural historian Mart Kalm has perceptively referred to this aesthetic shift in Baltic agriculture as establishing *oases* on the industrialized Soviet rural landscape (Kalm 2007, pp. 352–373). Planners sought to design a new type of Soviet rural community that neither fully replicated the urban mass housing neighbourhood, nor

could be considered reminiscent of a traditional rural village. In this field, values changed rather radically from urbanised agro-towns to *uniquely designed* garden-cities.

In 1989, one year prior to the restoration of Lithuanian independence, the Lithuanian SSR had 750 collective farms (employing 280,000 workers) and 275 Soviet farms (with 118,500 workers) (*Tarybų Lietuvos enciklopedija* 1988, 265). The collective farming system in Lithuania was ended with the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in March 11, 1990, but formally it lasted until 25 July 1991, when the newly elected democratic Lithuanian parliament passed a Land Reform Act that began the dismantling of the Soviet agricultural structure. Socialist experimentation with rural urbanisation unquestionably helped modernise the living standards of many Lithuanians, but it was done at the cost of terror, and this risky endeavour ended in the collapse of the kolkhoz system.

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