

The Vanishing Collective Farm Remains of Lithuanian Rural Landscape: Houses of Culture

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Introduction

Houses of culture are perhaps the most remarkable modern addition to Lithuanian rural landscape. Following World War II, Lithuania experienced a second Soviet occupation, during which a collective farming system was enforced upon the rural population. This process involved the nationalization of land, the dismantling of individual farms, and the establishment of large-scale, state-controlled agricultural enterprises known as collective farms. Settlement plans had to be redesigned to align with the new agenda. Soviet planners and functionaries regarded houses of culture as replacements for traditional religious buildings, as they were intended to disseminate socialist culture among the rural population and foster a sense of urban proximity within rural settlements. Palaces of socialist culture had to be built in the center of a settlement forming the main square. According to the soviet statistics, 659 houses of culture were built in the period between 1956 to 1972.¹ Most of the buildings of the time were built using standardized projects. Later, individual and more sophisticated projects were introduced. There was a plan to construct 134 new houses of culture and clubs in rural areas between 1986 and 1990.² During the period spanning from the 1980s to the early 1990s, approximately 40 administrative-cultural centers actually emerged within the collective and state-owned farms of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. These centers incorporated wellness facilities, cinemas, libraries, buffets, hotels and professional theatre halls. Voluminous multi-purpose buildings, easily visible from the main roads, have shaped the silhouettes of rural settlements and became a visual dominant that could oppose the church in urban structures.

The transition towards an independent nation in 1990 and the adoption of a market economy resulted in the dismantling of collective farms. In this new socio-economic landscape, individuals had to find ways to build new forms of collective identity. The transition was not an easy one. Individuals wanted to claim their part of the collective property. Recently erected houses of culture were disassembled “brick by brick.” The impact of this shift is visible in today’s rural landscape of Lithuania. Abandoned buildings, unfinished projects and empty spaces, all highlight a community’s lack of understanding and unity. However, it must be said that some communities have successfully navigated these challenges, demonstrating resilience in maintaining communal cohesion and preserving the integrity of their built environment.

This paper adopts a theoretical framework that examines the impact of totalitarian regimes on landscape transformation. These regimes often imposed drastic changes without regard for traditional continuity or sensitivity towards the environment. The collective farm system was enforced on rural population through coerced collectivization, which also led to profound changes in the natural landscape through the establishment of new city type settlements, melioration, mechanization of agriculture. Leveraging on James C. Scott’s critiques of top-down

1 *Tarybų Lietuvos kultūra. Trumpas statistikos rinkinys* [Soviet Lithuanian Culture. A Short Set of Statistics] (Statistika visiems, 1987), 5.

2 Bronius Barzdžiukas, “Kultūros židinys kaime” [Cultural hearth in the village], *Žemės ūkis* 3 (1987), 18.

planning and the limitations of authoritarian regimes' grand plans,³ the framework illuminates the stark contrast between the plans conceived by authorities and the lived reality experienced by communities. This framework highlights the complex interplay between top-down imposition, individual agency, and societal transitions, shedding light on the dynamics of landscape change under totalitarian rule and its aftermath.

Through this lens, the research seeks to understand the legacy of imposed structures and their role in shaping contemporary landscapes. This article aims to reveal the life cycle of culture houses in rural Lithuania from the architectural idea to the concrete ruins. The following paragraphs will explore the evolution of architectural forms and landscape, the transformation of traditional perceptions of rural architecture and challenging fate of rural administrative-cultural centers after the collapse of the collective farms. The research data was gathered from various sources including the Lithuanian state archives, publications in Soviet-era periodicals, and articles from regional press outlets. Additionally, some data was collected by the author in 2023, while establishing an inventory and while conducting on-site visits to these settlements.

Houses of Culture in Rural Context: Literature Review

In Lithuanian historiography, the architecture of collective farm administrative-cultural centers is analyzed through political, ideological lens or generally discussed within the broader context of urban development in the countryside. The primary contextual reference and inspiration for this research is the monograph *Baltic Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* by Marija Drėmaitė.⁴ The monograph explores the concept of creating proximity between the countryside and the city. Several valuable chapters that outline the urban principles of settlement formation and provide a brief examination of the phenomenon of cultural houses are included. In the article "House of culture as an element of socialist modernization,"⁵ architecture historian Vaidas Petrulis addresses political-economic aspects of the culture houses that had not been previously emphasized in the Lithuanian historiography. The article is mostly focused on typical project cases from the 1950s and 1960s.

A similar architectural phenomenon can be observed in other former Soviet republics, particularly Latvia and Estonia, which had comparable economic development and political contexts. The topic is extensively discussed by Estonian researchers. Mart Kalm outlines the main stages of the architecture of public centers development and presents political, economic and other conditions for the emergence of individual architecture in the countryside.⁶ His research allows to see certain similarities with the Lithuanian context, such as similar development stages, economic conditions, as well as organizations involved in creating and implementing projects of administrative-cultural centers.⁷ Comparison of M. Kalm's work to Lithuanian context also reveals existing gaps in Lithuanian historiography, for instance there is limited information on

3 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

4 Marija Drėmaitė, *Baltic Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania* (Berlin: DOM publishers, 2017), 281.

5 Vaidas Petrulis, "Cultural Centres of Soviet Lithuania. Parts of Multi-Stage Cultural-Domestic Service System," in *Survival of Modern from Cultural Centres to Planned Suburbs*, ed. C. Caldenby, O. Wedeburnn (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 2013).

6 Mart Kalm, "Collective Farms of Soviet Estonia: Promoters of Architecture," in *Survival of Modern from Cultural Centres to Planned Suburbs*, ed. Claes Caldenby and Ola Wedeburnn (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 2013), 22–33; Mart Kalm, "The Oasis of Industrialised Countryside in Soviet Estonia," in *Industry and Modernism. Companies, Architecture and Identity in the Nordic and Baltic Countries during the High-Industrial Period*, ed. A. Kervanto-Nevalinna (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2007), 352–371; etc.

7 Collective Farm Construction Design Institute – KSPI (orig. *Kolūkių statybos projektavimo institutas*), similar to EKE project in Estonia; inter-collective farm construction organizations – RTSO, similar to KEK in Estonia.

the role of construction organizations and technical intricacies of preparing individual projects. Laura Ingerpuu discusses the possibilities of preserving buildings of this typology and, in several articles, examines the future of cultural houses in the Baltic countries, addressing both threats and opportunities.⁸ Her articles explore the heritage protection possibilities of administrative-cultural centers and introduce the theoretical concepts of management and alternative preservations of such objects. However, the authors' comparison of the Baltic countries could benefit from further consideration. It currently lacks a comprehensive understanding of the overall situation and tends to generalize complex circumstances, particularly in the case of Lithuania. Andres Kurg's article "Werewolves on Cattle Street: Estonian Collective Farms and Postmodern Architecture" explores the emergence of postmodernism in Estonian rural settlements.⁹ Although postmodernism will not be discussed in detail, it is notable that the younger generation of architects in Lithuania were similarly influenced by postmodernist theories. This influence presents an opportunity for future comparison and discussion.

In Latvia, the topic is less studied, but the article "A Culture House - a Nucleus of a Collective Farm of Soviet Latvia" by Agate Enina and Jānis Krastinš is noteworthy.¹⁰ It discusses cultural houses from different periods (1955-1975 and 1975-1990), detailing their construction specifics, main architectural features, and the most representative examples in Latvian villages and towns. The particular houses of culture cases are also examined in the articles of Maija Rudovska.¹¹

It can be noted that literature on the matter is lacking reflections on how the architecture of administrative-cultural centers affected rural landscape and understanding of rural architecture, what happened to the rural buildings during the transition period in Lithuania (and in other Baltic countries). While analyzing different cases, the quantity of buildings and the scope of transformations are not emphasized enough, leaving the discussion is open for further considerations. There is a growing scholarly interest in examining the architectural landscapes of rural regions. The thematic issue of the FAM journal, dedicated to modern rural architecture, is especially relevant in this discussion.¹²

Silicate Brick in the Landscape: Houses of Culture in the 1950s and 1960s

The first network of soviet cultural institutions in Soviet-occupied Lithuania was formed immediately after the World War II together with forced collectivization of agriculture. Soviet officials quickly established clubhouses using existing infrastructure in the Lithuanian countryside, such as houses that belonged to deported kulaks, former manors, etc. The aim of soviet clubs was to raise the cultural and political awareness of the rural population, as well as to promote

8 Laura Ingerpuu, "Socialist architecture as today's dissonant heritage: administrative buildings of collective farms in Estonia," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 9 (2018), 9, 954–968, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2018.1428664; Ingerpuu, "Threats and opportunities to Baltic socialist architecture in rural decline: the case of collective farm centers," *Journal of Baltic studies* (2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2022.2061025>; Ingerpuu, "Comparing the socialist rural architecture of the Baltic States: the past and the future of the administrative-cultural centres of collective farms," *SHS Web of Conferences*, 63, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20196311004>.

9 Andres Kurg "Werewolves on Cattle Street: Estonian Collective Farms and Postmodern Architecture," in *Second World Postmodernisms. Architecture and Society under Late Socialism*, ed. V. Kulić (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 111–27.

10 Agate Enina, Jānis Krastinš, "A Culture House – a Nucleus of a Collective Farm of Soviet Latvia," *Architecture and Urban Planning* 6 (2012), 43–50, <https://core.ac.uk/display/13132315>.

11 Maija Rudovska, "In the Shadows of Nostalgia. Marta Staņa Legacy In Latvia," in *Modernism: Between Nostalgia and Criticism*, ed. Marija Drėmaitė, Julija Reklaitė, Viktorija Šiaulytė, Architektūros fondas, <https://leidiniu.archfondas.lt/en/alf-02/modernism-between-nostalgia-and-criticism>.

12 Cristina Pallini, "Rural Modern. Themes and Contexts," *FAMagazine. Research and Projects on Architecture and the City* 62-63 (2022), <https://www.famagazine.it/index.php/famagazine/issue/view/37>, accessed April 7, 2024.



Fig. 1: Netičkampis house of culture, by Aleksandras Medvedevas, 1967

the collective farm system and convince them of its advantages.¹³ The construction of the new settlements and culture houses started only in the late 1950s.

In 1951 architects Kazimieras Šešelgis, Mečislovas Kleinas and Vladimiras Zubovas wrote a theoretical framework regarding planning of new rural settlements, which adhered to modern city principles, including functional zoning, garden-city residential areas, etc. According to the authors, the main element of socialist village was the center of the settlement which was envisioned to encompass all public spaces: recreational green zones for leisure and sports, and such service facilities as a dining hall, a shop, and a house of culture. The architects conceived the center of the settlement not only as a cluster of public buildings, but also as the focus of the socio-political life of the collective farms. It was meant to serve as a meeting place for workers to discuss their industrial and household concerns, political matters, to engage in artistic activities, and to spend their leisure time in a “cultural manner.”¹⁴ Therefore, the center of the settlement was given a special position in the urban plan: it had to be easily accessible from the streets within the settlement and main roads that lead to it, it had to be built in picturesque place, usually on a hill, near a river, a lake or a forest.¹⁵ Consequently, the primary structure of the center had to be a house of culture. These concepts transferred to the “Instruction for Site Selection, Layout and Development of Rural Settlements” adopted by the Council of Ministers of Soviet Lithuania in 1960. This instruction also included a statement that all administrative-cultural buildings of collective farm settlements must be built using standardized projects.¹⁶

13 *Lietuvos kultūra sovietinės ideologijos nelaisvėje 1940–1990* [Lithuania's Culture Captured by Soviet Ideology in 1940–1990], ed. Arūnas Streikus and Juozapas Romualdas Bagušauskas (Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 2005), 51.

14 Kazimieras Šešelgis, Mečislovas Kleinas and Vladimiras Zubovas, *Kolūkių gyvenviečių planavimas* [The Planning of Collective Farm Settlements] (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla, 1951), 17.

15 *Ibid.*, 22.

16 LSSR Council of Ministers Decree 19, *Lietuvos Tarybų Socialistinės Respublikos Aukščiausios Tarybos ir*

At the end of the 1950s, rural clubs were reorganized into houses of culture, which could offer a wider range of activities, including exhibitions, theatre plays, and amateur circles. Reorganization encouraged the construction of new and larger houses of culture.¹⁷ The department of Standardized Design of the State Agricultural Construction Planning Institute prepared designs for houses of culture, which included an event hall with a stage, a lobby, a cloakroom, a club room with a library, and premises for the collective farm administration.¹⁸ These projects were compiled into an album of recommendations. The introductory part of the album discusses the importance of selecting correct location and plot size for the house of culture – it was crucial to leave the space for trees and bushes, a playground, a park, and an active leisure zone.¹⁹

The projects in the album clearly exhibit a predominance of modernist forms: the façades of the buildings are devoid of decorative elements, window and door openings are rhythmically divided, and reinforced concrete canopy is added to the main entryway. Architectural forms are modest and reserved. In some cases, the façades are proposed to be plastered, and there is also an option of a flat or a pitched roof covered with clay tiles. Although the album includes a variety of finishes, in reality, the architectural quality was poor due to a lack of building materials. In July 1961, the State Committee for Construction and Architecture of the LSSR Council of Ministers banned the plastering of the façades of all residential, cultural and industrial buildings, permitting it only in exceptional cases, because of economic reasons.²⁰ This led to the dominance of unplastered silicate brick buildings in the countryside. (Fig. 1)

The standardized, silicate-brick, easily assembled buildings of the 1960s helped to rapidly develop the cultural infrastructure. However, most of the settlements were left without any architectural landmark in their landscape. A house of culture was seldom built in an exceptional, picturesque location within a settlement; architecturally it exhibited minimal divergence from industrial or residential structures. Architectural critics observed that limited diversity of standardized projects was insufficient to provide a distinguishable “face” for the settlement. Perhaps the best articulation of the issue was provided by Alfonsas Giedraitis, the chairman of the Ėriškiai collective farm: “In the past, the main architectural accent in every town was a church, [...] but I have not seen any of them spoil the settlement with their architecture.”²¹ The standardized projects were criticized not only for their cliché architecture and their similarity to each other, but also for not being comfortable enough: they lacked good backstage areas, working rooms, storage for scenery, etc. This limited the activities of the collective farms’ houses of culture, which could not accommodate performances by professional troupes.²²

Only a couple of collective farms managed to create a landmark building for their settlements. Achieving distinctiveness was not possible through architectural features or building scale. Instead, it was accomplished through art in the interiors, landscaping and elements, such as fountains, individually designed benches or fences. The determination of the chairmen of collective farms played a pivotal role in this process. For example, the chairman of collective farm “Pergalė” (“The Victory”) Jonas Viliūnas commissioned landscape architect Teklė Šešelgienė to create a project for the park situated near the recently built house of culture.²³ The collective

Vyriausybės žinios, 19 (1960), 50.

17 “Kultūros namai” [Houses of culture], <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/kulturos-namai/>, accessed April 6, 2024.

18 Drėmaitė, *Baltic Modernism. Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania*, 281.

19 *Kultūros pastatų tipinių ir rekomenduojamų projektų albumas* [Album of Standardised and Recommended Projects for Cultural Institutions], ed. V. Bytautas (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla, 1961), 7.

20 LSSR Council of Ministers Decree 43; *Statyba ir architektūra*, 7 (1961): 32.

21 A. Liekis, “Prekybos centrai kaime” [Shopping centres in a village], *Statyba ir architektūra* 11 (1979), 3.

22 A. Dulkinas, “Kuo kūrensime kultūros namus?” [What will we use to heat the House of Culture], *Švyturys* 21 (1968): 22.

23 Vaida Deveikienė “Teklės Šešelgienės (1925–1982) kūrybos kraštovaizdžio architektūroje aspektai” [Teklė Šešelgienė (1925–1982): aspects of creative work in landscape architecture], *Mokslas – Lietuvos ateitis* 6 (2014): 286.

farm workers created 13-hectare park, which included alpine gardens, rubble block fences, a small waterfall, a summer stage (designed by landscape architect Alfonsas Kiškis), rare plants and trees.²⁴ The use of better building materials and landscaping as a technique to customize houses of culture is also evident in the settlements of Juknaičiai, Klausučiai and Ėriškiai. (Fig. 2)

However, these examples are the exception rather than the rule. Most collective farm chairmen were pragmatic. It was deemed better to build a cowshed than to undertake landscape projects; it was preferable to invest in livestock than to finance cultural events. The quality of cultural services was not satisfactory enough. Consequently, people turned to individual leisure activities, such as the increasingly accessible television. The occupancy of the halls of the house of culture was very low – just a few hours per week.²⁵ By the 1960s, farms were already economically capable of financing more elaborate buildings, paying salaries to a few specialists who came from the cities, or sending young people to study with scholarships from the collective farms.²⁶ The new opportunities for active chairmen emerged in the early 1970s.

Emergence of an Architectural Phenomenon: Houses of Culture in the 1970s and 1980s

The Council of the Lithuanian SSR adopted a resolution providing for the implementation of a new scheme of culture houses by 1972 in order to increase the occupancy of culture houses and improve their infrastructure. The existing houses of culture were criticized for their unattractive activities, repertoire of a “low ideological and artistic level,” and lack of “orientation towards the needs of the collective farms,” particularly of the youth. It was anticipated that the new directive would help to raise the authority of cultural workers, who were supposed to disseminate valuable culture to the masses. More significantly, according to the resolution, collective farms were allowed to finance designing and building of houses of culture in the settlements.²⁷

The ambitions of the collective farm chairmen to showcase the progress and wealth of their farms led to the emergence of a unique rural architecture. Most designs were created by the Collective Farm Construction Design Institute, established in 1967. Many of the architects spent their entire careers in the institute and designed at least one public building for the collective farm. Most of them only received orders from the collective farms and were not widely recognized on a national level. It is particularly interesting that many workers at the institute were not only young specialists, but also a lot of them were former deportees, including chief architects of the institute Bronius Barzdžiukas²⁸ and Povilas Jakučionis.²⁹ This fact, of course, was not widely known until the 1990s.

Architects were provided with an opportunity to fulfil all their architectural aspirations. A house of culture as an architectural type was fairly new; there was no tradition or common understanding of what it should be like. It posed a challenge for the younger generation. In nearly all project documentation architects asserted their aim to establish an architectural focal point within the settlement. However, approaches varied.

24 Loretta Ripskytė “Skaistgirio parkas žaliuoja jau 50 metų” [The Skaistgirys Park Has Been Green for 50 Years], *birzietis.lt*, August 28, 2014, <https://www.birzietis.lt/daugiau/pravartu-zinoti/skaistgirio-parkas-zaliuoja-jau-50-metu>, accessed April 7, 2024.

25 Vaidas Petrulis “Kultūros namai kaip socialistinės Lietuvos kaimo modernizacijos elementas” [Cultural Centres as an Element of Socialist Modernization of Village Areas in Lithuania], *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 36 (2012), 282.

26 J. Jurevičius, “Ką norėčiau pasakyti” [What I Would Like to Say], *Švyturys* 2 (1975), 4.

27 LSSR Council of Ministers Decree of December 8, 1969, “Dėl kultūros įstaigų veiklos po Lietuvos TSR Pirmojo kultūros darbuotojų suvažiavimo ir priemonių jai gerinti” [On the activities of cultural institutions after the First Congress of Cultural Workers of the Lithuanian SSR and measures to improve them], Lithuanian Central State Archive, f. R-754, ap. 1, b. 978.

28 Barzdžiukas was political prisoner for 5 years (1951–1955), sent to Unzhlag, Gorky Oblast, where GULAG camp was.

29 Jakučionis was sentenced for anti-Soviet activities and sent to Vorkuta. He was only 16 years old at the time.



Fig. 2: House of culture in Juknaičiai by Aleksandras Medvedevas, 1984
 Fig. 3: House of culture in Perekšliai, 2022



Some architects strived to fulfil their full potential by introducing complex structures into the rural landscape. They experimented with the volumes, styles, plasticity and the implementation of reinforced concrete. A characteristic example could be house of culture in Perekšliai, the central settlement of “Ažalynas” (“A Sprout Forest”) collective farm. Designed by young architect Henrikas Šilgalis in 1972.³⁰ Situated at the heart of the settlement near the park, the house of culture, boasts a strikingly expressive design, characterized by a flowing silhouette. Its rounded corners, slender columns supporting heavy volumes, sunken plinth, dynamic sleek forms, strip windows, and rough plaster finishing all embody the aesthetics of late Soviet modernism. The architectural ambition of the project was exceptional, yet the building itself remained unfinished. (Fig. 3)

Other architects leaned towards interpretation of regional forms, claiming that new buildings should reflect traditional rural landscape rather than showcase the architect's capacities and ambitions.³¹ Red brick, slate tiled roofs and wood finishes were considered to be typical for the Lithuanian rural landscape. However, this perception seems to have been influenced more by the landscape of German towns rather than by traditional Lithuanian vernacular architecture. One of the most unique interpretations of vernacular architecture were proposed by architect Juozas Zinkevičius in Punia. The house of culture and restaurant-hotel building “Punelė” were constructed by the river Nemunas, near the forest. The architect chose tiled slate roofs to disguise the volume (13,290 m³!) of the culture house building.³² The restaurant-hotel faces the river, with numerous display windows providing ample opportunity to enjoy the natural surroundings. Natural materials, such as red brick, clay tiles, wood and dolomite, were used both in the interiors and exteriors. Additionally, a landscaping project was implemented to connect the buildings and integrate them into the surrounding nature.

The midway was to take consideration of the current situation and landscape of the settlement. Older generation architect Algimantas Mačiulis believed that modern architecture should incorporate an appropriate scale and local materials, to ensure that the building blends into and complements the overall rural landscape. This was motivated by the fact that earlier examples of professional architecture in the countryside (manor houses and churches) did not follow traditional vernacular building methods, but due to their scale, they were integrated into the overall natural context.³³ Mačiulis has designed most of the public buildings in “Draugas” (“The Comrade”) collective farm settlement Alksniupiai. He has created the administrative-cultural center, the school and the spa center, which was called “profilaktoriumas,” meaning a preventive healthcare, in those days. The quality of architecture, landscaping and materiality were praised by his colleagues.

The tradition of creating landscapes around houses of culture also evolved. Architects were aware of the building surroundings, and each project was accompanied by the site plans. The site plan included not only the technical aspects such as electricity and piping, but also the aesthetic elements, such as flowerbeds, shrubs, deciduous and coniferous trees, fountains, benches, etc. Additionally, the architect determined the placement of the parking lots, squares and pathways.

Sometimes it was difficult for architects to resist the urge to overbuild. In 1978, architect Algimantas Jukna received a significant assignment to design a multi-purpose building for the Dotnuva settlement of the collective farm named after soviet hero Marija Melnikaitė. The building was required to accommodate various facilities including a theatre hall with 500 seats, administrative offices, a dance hall, a sports hall, collective farm office, and more. Finding a suitable location for the building and integrating it into the environment posed a significant challenge. Ultimately, it was decided to position “the palace” close to, yet not in the heart of the settlement. The architect opted to cover the stage “box” with red tinplate, creating a rounded

30 Drėmaitė, *Baltic Modernisms: Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania*, 285.

31 Kazimieras Šešelgis, “Ginkime kaimą nuo miesto statinių” [Let's protect the countryside from urban structures], *Statyba ir architektūra* 12 (1984), 4–5.

32 Advertising brochure of Collective Farm Design Institute, Vilnius Regional State Archive, f. 1171, ap. 4, b. 1896.

33 Interview with Algimantas Mačiulis, November 28, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/85563714>, accessed April 6, 2024.

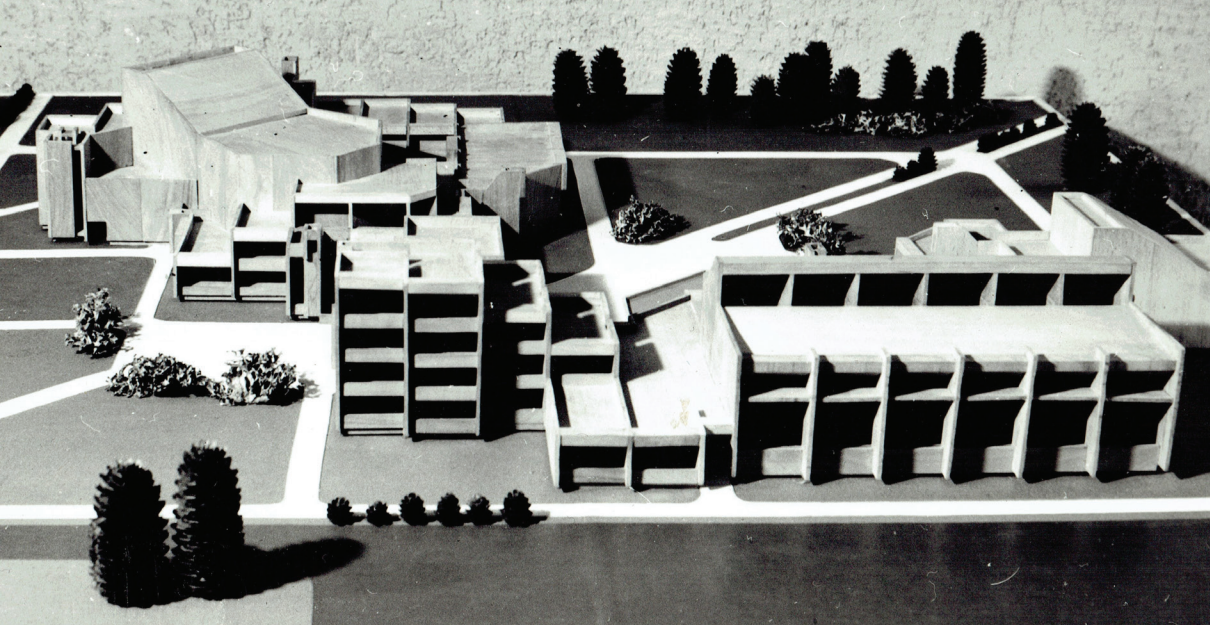


Fig. 4: Layout of Dotnuva administrative-cultural center, personal archive of Algimantas Jukna
 Fig. 5: Dotnuva in 2023

“crown” that serves as the sole visible element of the house of culture from the settlement center. The house of culture in Dotnuva aimed to showcase the prosperity of the collective farm. Despite the settlement’s modest size of around 1,000 residents, they undertook the construction of a house of culture that even the nearby city of Kėdainiai, with a population of over 27,000 people, did not possess. In hindsight, the architect now feels a sense of guilt, recognizing that his ambitions at the time aligned too closely with those of the client, the collective farm chairman. He wonders if he should have advocated for more modest ambitions instead.³⁴ The house of culture in Dotnuva, along with many others, is now too large for the community. It stands partly abandoned and most of its unique features are lost. (Fig. 4, 5)

34 Personal conversation with architect Algimantas Jukna, April 18, 2023.

The aspirations of architects and the financial resources allocated by collective farm chairmen for the development of public infrastructure were steadily increasing. The most innovative architectural designs, predominantly characterized by postmodernist aesthetics, were designed just prior to 1990. Some of these projects remained solely on paper, while others were starting to emerge in the landscape. And then a radical shift occurred.

Adaptation, Transformation and Concrete Remains: Houses of Culture after 1990

After the independent republic of Lithuania was restored in March 1990, the importance of collective farms began to diminish: state decrees granted more private land to collective farm workers, the authority of collective farm administration over farmers decreased, and the privatization of land formerly under collective farm control was initiated. Given the widely recognized harm caused by forced collectivization during the Soviet occupation, the state adopted a policy declaring the dismantling of collective and Soviet farms as a priority. Ultimately, in 1992, collective and state-owned farms underwent a transition into agricultural enterprises or closed joint-stock companies, some of them soon dissolved.³⁵

The assets of collective farms could be privatized by the (former) members, who worked there not less than five years, also medical, educational, cultural, and other employees, who lived in the territory of an agricultural enterprise and served employees of the collective farm. The law adopted by the government stated, that the assets can be divided among the members in kind ("natura") or money.³⁶ With their share, they could have entered or formed the agricultural enterprise or sold their part to other members. If the agricultural enterprise was liquidated, assets were divided among the collective farm workers and the buildings were transferred to a few or dozens of shareholders.

Since the house of culture often shared space with the administrative facilities of the collective farm, the dissolution or transformation of the collective farm into an agricultural company played a crucial role in preserving the cultural function within the premises. Some of these buildings have been fully privatized by agricultural companies, but not all assets were registered on the privatization lists. Social and industrial infrastructures built by the government, rather than the farms, could only be privatized with district board approval. Some houses of culture were excluded from the privatization list and were taken over by the municipalities. All unprivatised assets were automatically transferred to the municipality. Consequently, the destinies of former collective farm houses of culture varied: some have vanished due to inadequate privatization or fragmented ownership, whereas others have endured and have been restructured into cultural centers supported by the government.

The new owners of collective farm houses of culture were confronted with problems. It was difficult to maintain original functions, complete the construction which was relevant for the buildings that started to emerge prior to 1990, pay for the heating and electricity. Most importantly, it was difficult to unite what was now a community of free individuals. The rural population continued shrinking. The chairmen of collective farms fostered the perception of necessity for houses of culture equipped with professional theatre halls. However, following the dissolution of the collective farms, the impractical scale of these structures became apparent. Many houses of culture proved to be excessively large for their communities. Many of the buildings' halls had the capacity to accommodate at least double the settlement's population. The network of cultural centers became irrational. A number of buildings were abandoned because of their size, for example, houses of culture in Nemunaitis, Inturkė, Dotnuva, Debeikiai and many others.

35 The Law of Land Reform, September 1, 1991, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.2718?jfwid=>, accessed November 19, 2024.

36 The privatization law of agricultural enterprises of Lithuania, <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.671AE17BDB50>, accessed July 6, 2024.



Fig. 6: House of culture in Kirov's collective farm

During soviet times, the house of culture of Kirov collective farm in Mindūnai (built in 1975, architect Povilas Adomaitis, Fig. 6)³⁷ was considered to be an exemplary one. It was considered to be the first successful attempt at interpreting tradition through a modern lens. This building symbolized a shift in rural architecture, marking a change in both the thought and the development direction. Recognizing its significance, the model of the house of culture was awarded a first-degree diploma at the international exhibition in Zagreb.³⁸ The building had a theatre hall with 250 seats, dance hall, buffet, summer terrace. A total volume of the building was 9,500 m³. The settlement's landscape consists of farmsteads featuring two-story silicate brick houses constructed during the Soviet era. During the construction, the settlement accommodated 168 residents with the population gradually rising to 219 by the year 1989. Moreover, the settlement is located 12 kilometers away from the city with the house of culture seating another 300 in the hall and 11 kilometers away from another collective farm settlement with a house of culture with yet another 500 seats. Maintaining cultural events and keeping the building in Mindūnai no longer seemed rational. The house of culture was privatized by catholic charity organization "Vilties versmė" (Spring of Hope) in 1998. Unfortunately, the organization did not employ the premises, the building was abandoned for two decades. Also, the organization did not abide by the obligations to maintain or demolish the building. In 2020, the municipality declared building ownerless and the remaining reinforced concrete skeleton was demolished, at a cost of almost 17,000 euros.³⁹ The case of the Mindūnai house of culture confirms the significance of social aspects associated with the buildings of this type. Despite remarkable architecture of historical significance, houses of culture failed to accommodate the changing needs of the community.

37 Povilas Adomaitis, "Kultūros namai Mindūnuose" [House of Culture in Mindūnai], *Statyba ir architektūra* 8 (1979), 10.

38 "Molėtų rajono Kirovo kolūkyje" [In Molėtai District Kirov's Collective farm], *Švyturys* 15 (1978), 3.

39 Reporteris Monika, "Mindūnuose nebeliks buvusių kultūros namų" [Mindūnai Will No Longer Have a Former House of Culture], *etaplus*, October 6, 2020, <https://etaplus.lt/naujiena/mindunuose-nebeliks-buvusi-kulturos-namu>, accessed April 7, 2024.

The Darbėnai house of culture also disappeared due to impracticality. In 1984, the building was designed by architect Jonas Zmitravičius, and construction was scheduled to start in 1986.⁴⁰

The House of culture was designed to include club rooms intended for farmers to engage in art circles during their leisure time, along with a reading room and library. Additionally, it featured a two-story hall with seating for 400 individuals, complete with a professional stage equipment, a sound system, and a lighting. Furthermore, there was provision for a hotel within the building. It was anticipated that the facilities would host a variety of events, including celebrations, weddings, and funeral services.⁴¹ The construction of the building remained unfinished. In 1991, ownership was transferred to the Kretinga District Municipality, which enlisted the participation of the Darbėnai Consumer Cooperative to aid in its completion, with a promise of receiving a portion of the building in return.

The former Collective Farm Construction Design Institute, now a joint-stock company, provided services to redesign and convert administrative-cultural centers into multifunctional centers, incorporating banks, pharmacies, bookshops, school, etc. Additionally, they offered possibility to enhance the technical qualities of these buildings, such as improving their heating energy efficiency.⁴² Archival records reveal a renovation project for Darbėnai house of culture was developed after 1990, which entailed repurposing the rooms formerly dedicated to art circles and hotel areas for commercial activities. The plan included the addition of a bookstore and retail space adjacent to the cultural center.⁴³

The municipality intended to carry out cultural activities in its part of the building, but it was too expensive to heat the building, so the activities were carried out in unheated rooms. Artūras Juška, a cultural worker in Darbėnai, recalls that the young people at the dances used to warm their hands in front of the heated “buržuika” (a stove) before dancing.⁴⁴ In 2003, the settlement had 1,560 residents, but only 30 of them were involved in cultural circles. The community was largely passive, and cultural workers were uncertain about how to engage and involve more people in activities. In 2007, the house of culture was relocated to the school premises. A year later, a fire broke out in the building of the former house of culture, which further exacerbated the challenges.

Despite the municipality's efforts, including organizing 11 auctions to sell the property, no successful bids were made. The starting price for the auction decreased dramatically, dropping from 500,000 litas in 2008 to 35,000 in 2011. Locals suggested a more practical approach would be to sell the building in parts. With 1.5 million bricks, selling each for 10 cents would generate 150,000 litas. Eventually, the building was purchased with intentions to demolish it.⁴⁵ By 2016, the structure had been completely demolished.

Thus, as in the case of Mindūnai, the challenges stemming from both the lack of practical sense of the owners and the community's needs are apparent. However, in the case of Darbėnai, there seems to be a certain degree of conflict among the local residents as well. Some individuals expressed satisfaction that the house of culture, which posed a threat to people's safety, had been demolished, while others questioned why the building had fallen into disrepair, attributing blame to the authorities for failing to maintain it and opting for the easier route of demolition. Some expressed hope that a new cultural centre would be established in its place to fulfil the community's requirements, while others doubted whether Darbėnai would ever have a cultural center once the building was torn down. (Fig. 7)

40 Project of house of culture in Darbėnai, Vilnius Regional State Archive, f. 1068, ap. 11, b. 533–538.

41 R. Alekna, “Šventosios ir Kretingos kelių sankryžoje” [At the Intersection of Šventoji and Kretinga], *Statyba ir architektūra* 10 (1984), 24.

42 Povilas Jakučionis “Ką daryti su nereikalingais pastatais” [What to do with unnecessary buildings?], *Žemės ūkis* 2 (1992), 6.

43 Darbėnai house of culture project corrections, Vilnius Regional State Archive, f. 1068, ap. 11, b. 539.

44 Irena Šeškevičienė, “Darbėnų kultūros namai – parduoti” [House of Culture in Darbėnai – Sold], February 25, 2011, <https://www.pajurionaujienos.com/?act=exp&sid=6316>, accessed April 8, 2024.

45 Ibid.



Fig. 7: Orthophotos of Bridai house of culture

In 1990s, the rural population was lost and unsure about the future. That sometimes led to spontaneous actions and alienation of the community and the built environment. In Bridai, the collective farm “Pirmyn” (“Forward”) settlement, a complex of public facilities emerged during the late Soviet period. It included a foster home, the “Pasaka” (“The Fairytale”) kindergarten, a shop, and a cultural center. Renowned for its architecture and landscape, the settlement drew delegations of visitors. Even Mikhail Gorbachev visited the settlement in 1990.⁴⁶ While construction had started just prior to 1990, the house of culture had a short-lived existence. Locals vividly recount how, amidst the initial disintegration of the collective farms, the newly constructed, marble-paneled cultural palace became subject to partitioning among over 500 shareholders. They divided it by tearing down the building with tractors and selling off bricks, aluminum windows, and timber. In 2003, tensions between the 500 owners reappeared. They had to determine the course of action regarding the remains of the building. The proposal was to sell the ruin with a demolition permit for 50 thousand litas, yet some owners protested claiming that the remains of the building held greater value.⁴⁷ The identity of the purchaser remains undisclosed, but the undeniable truth remains: the house of culture ceased to exist and was replaced by a meadow.

The chairman of the former collective farm claims locals were disoriented, unaware that they were dismantling their own asset to their own detriment⁴⁸. However, there were suggestions that the chairman was taking assets from the collective farm himself. Jocas paid his son-in-law for the MTZ-80 tractor using the farm’s funds without the permission of the collective farm board. The First Secretary of the District Communist Party Committee got the opportunity to buy garden house (“dacha”) from a warehouse at a wholesale price.⁴⁹

Of course, there are more successful cases. For example, previously mentioned Alksniupiai house of culture, where the community is led by a leading figure – the longstanding art director Laima Didžbalienė who has been part of the establishment since the era of the collective farm. Although most of the buildings in the administrative-cultural center became shared, they have managed to avoid destruction or dismantling. Some communities have even managed to complete the construction of the buildings and maintain the original function. The house of culture in Skapiškis (architect Linas Janėnas, 1990)⁵⁰ was designed as two interconnected blocks linked by a colonnade, harmonizing with the surrounding small-scale architecture. Only one of the planned blocks was built, which may turn out to be an advantage for its maintenance.

46 There are few photographs taken during the occasion, for example <https://www.europeana.eu/lt/item/2021803/C150000478017>, accessed April 8, 2024.

47 Tomas Beržinskas, “Aistros dėl griauanamų ir griūvančių kultūros namų” [Passions Over Demolished and Collapsing Cultural Houses], *skrastas.lt*, October 13, 2003, <http://www.krastas.lt/?data=2003-10-14&rub=1143711027&id=1146720579>, accessed March 25, 2023.

48 Rita Žadeikytė, “Prarasti Bridai” [Lost Bridai], *Skrastas*, October 4, 2008, <https://www.skrastas.lt/aktualijos/prarasti-bridai>, accessed April 7, 2024.

49 Vidmantas Bureika and Birutė Kybartienė, “Sodo nameliai, varis, plytos - ?” [Garden houses, copper, bricks - ?], *Šiaulių kraštas* 83 (1991), 2.

50 Martynas Mankus, “Skapiškio kultūros namai” [House of Culture in Skapiškis], *Architektūros ir urbanistikos tyrimų centras*, <https://autc.lt/architekturos-objektas/?id=1991>, accessed April 8, 2024.

Although the original artistic idea has not been fully realized, the completed postmodernist structure presents an intriguing interpretation of classical architecture. Its proportions appear respectful and fitting for the site, situated on a gently sloping terrain with a stepped southern façade. Originally clad in yellowish brick, the building exterior was altered after the community received financing from EU structural funds to insulate the building. The interior is almost devoid of authentic details, with the exception of the postmodern gabled roof skylight in the foyer. The community actively maintains and utilizes the building for its intended cultural purposes, ensuring its continued relevance and vitality.

It must be said that most of administrative-cultural centers built using standardized projects did not go through the challenges mentioned above. Modest volumes and functional layouts of the premises proved to be particularly well suited to communities experiencing a decrease in population. It also made them easily adaptable to alternative uses.

Conclusions

The architecture of houses of culture gradually progressed over time, delineating a narrative depicting the transition from standardized architecture to individual designs. Enormous and expensive objects resembled urban sites in terms of their forms and complexity generously provided by the well to do farms and state support as part of the system of cultural houses and state sponsored cultural events. In the last soviet decade (1980-1990) complex structural solutions were implemented. The second half of the 20th century shows the creativity of the younger generation of architects and their different approaches to solving the question of what the new building typologies emerging in the countryside should look like, and what the relationship between old and new architecture should be in the rural environment. Not all architects and chairmen were able to control their desire to make the most of all the possibilities.

The framework used in this paper shed light on the ways in which centralized planning can often fail to account for local contexts and practices, influencing landscape changes in the process. Under communism, the collective farm chairmen created an illusion of necessity for monumental buildings in rural environment. In the post-Soviet transition period, it is logical that former structures are abandoned as they no longer correspond to the reality or needs of the community. With reduced funding, many previously built structures were abandoned. This shift underscores the influence of changing ideologies and economic policies on architectural neglect which happened in post-Soviet collective farms.

The period of transformation and dismantling of the collective farm system occurred rapidly. The government of the newly independent state struggled to provide stability and clear vision for agricultural reform. Due to instability, people began stealing and appropriating parts of their collective property. Society was composed of isolated individuals who still needed to learn how to reclaim sense of responsibility for their own environment and cultural life. Eventually communities had to learn to organize themselves and form bonds that were neither forced nor driven by material needs. Soviet government-imposed rituals needed to evolve into voluntary participation and active engagement. It took time for communities to recover and regain trust in one another.

An analysis of the condition of the buildings shows that the most easily maintained, renovated and adapted to current needs are those using standard designs. A compact volume of the building, a modest interior and a small number of rooms result in lower maintenance costs, especially for heating. A paradox can be observed: standardized buildings from the 1960s, which were described as ordinary and cliché, are maintained and used by the communities. In contrast, unique individual design buildings, once highly praised, have become unwanted. This disparity shows how disconnected the chairmen, the Soviet government, and the architects were from the reality and actual needs of communities. While showcasing the ambitions of architects and chairmen of the collective farms, these concrete ruins are the most evident remains of the fall of collective farms.

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