

The act of “talka” in historic preservation discourse in contemporary Latvia



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Each year, Latvians engage in *talkas*, which are locally well-known non-profit initiatives based on voluntary participation in urban rehabilitation and environmental betterment, usually by cleaning up shared areas. Engagement of small communities in *talkas* helps achieve more with less, and serves to empower and preserve the feeling of inclusion, identity and belonging. Throughout the years, *talka*, or communal work for a common benefit, has been one of the images of public participation in architecture, urban planning and historic preservation of Latvia.

Methodology

This paper reviews available historical data to provide evidence of participatory urban work occurring prior to 1960s, when the notion gained popularity in the western world, as well as contemporary manifestations of participatory urbanism. The main aim of this study is to challenge the status quo of knowledge regarding the history of collaborative construction work, disseminate modern-world examples from the Baltic countries. As the review shows that these successful bottom-down activities in the architecture and construction field appear to be an essential part of the development of the industry throughout the past decades in the Baltics, it is deemed worthwhile to encourage more positive examples of this notion worldwide. The selected examples of *talkas* were intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the different types of involvement observed (originator, fundator, contractor) among the following group of actors: local community or volunteers, individuals-professionals (architects, artists, entrepreneurs), private investors, private companies, non-government organizations (NGO) or non-profit organizations, government or public institutions, and European Union.

Brief historical background

According to archaeological research, Latvian culture dates back thousands of years B.C., when proto-Baltic settlers arrived in the area of current Latvia [1]. However, since the times of the 12th-century crusades from the Roman Empire, Latvia has only been independent twice: for the last 28 years, and another two decades between WWI and WWII

(1921 and 1940). In addition to many years of occupation and control, which prompted the need to preserve local identity, it is worth noting that the country's population is declining, and currently counts less than two million people [2], including only about 1.2 million native Latvians [3]. This made strengthening local identity a key element in historic preservation and design in the Baltics. To illustrate the various types of involvement, examples selected for this study include historic buildings listed in the national register and old buildings that are not historically significant on a national level but are very important for small local communities.

The path of Latvian history influenced the fact that many ancient concepts and traditions have been preserved until contemporary times. In fact, for centuries, they have persevered thanks to the oral tradition of *dainas*, or folklore songs. Lyrics from various *dainas* provide information on the act of *talka* and its associated customs [4].

Talka is an ancient Balto-Slavic and Nordic concept of local communities engaging in collaborative agricultural work, beginning and ending with ritual singing, and often followed by supper and a homemade beer tasting, organized by the field owner [5].

During the Soviet times in Latvian history, the main sectors of the economy were controlled by the state [6]. Therefore, before the 1990s, bottom-up construction activities happened unofficially and are currently considered unauthorized construction. Until 2014 [7], in Latvia this term meant buildings erected without a permit and/or not according to an approved set of drawings for construction. In 2014, the definition of unauthorized con-

struction was extended to include buildings not being used for their original approved use and occupancy type, as well as, construction works started without appropriate documentation required by the building code [8]. Without including restoration efforts, it was estimated in 2015 that approximately 15-30% of buildings in Latvia were built illegally.

The notion of communal work, or *talka*, has been preserved until today through the act



Image 1. Certificate from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Aleksandras Sakas' participation in the *talka* in Šventoji on August 6, 1939. From the archive of Aleksandras Sakas [10]

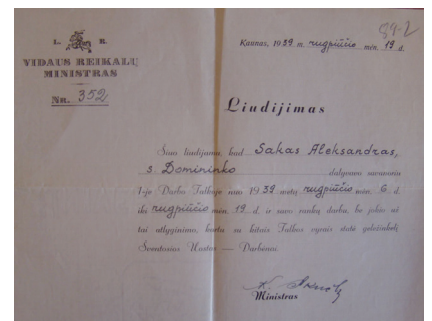


Image 2. Historic image showing voluntary railroad building work in Šventoji, dated August 6, 1939. From the archive of Aleksandras Sakas [11]

of achieving larger tasks via collective work. Some sources state that participatory urbanism was born in the 1960s and was brought to Latvia in the 1990s by urbanists returning from North America after regaining independence [9]. However, this refers to modern participatory ideas, and often only includes public consultation, but not the act of *talka* itself.

However, there is written evidence and historic photographs of *talka* in the Baltics from 1939. When Lithuania lost the port city of Klaipeda in 1939 to Nazi Germany, the government immediately decided to reconstruct the port in Šventoji to restore the previous access to the Baltic Sea. The Ministry of the Interior published a *talka* invitation in the Lithuanian press in the June 8, 1939 edition. There are photographs showing volunteers building the railroad to the port city (Image 1), as well as confirmation documents from the Ministry showing participation from volunteers (Image 2). The work included three shifts of 150 volunteers at the age of 18 to 30. Each shift took two weeks. The government provided the workers with work uniforms and equipment; tents and a military kitchen were set up for them near the seaside [12]. As a result of this activity, as soon as in July 1939, the port was able to house its first timber cargo ship, and soon after, the only Lithuanian warship [13].

This example reinforces the idea that participatory work was known in the Baltics far before the 60s. However, the term in the past and now can be understood differently. Currently, there are two visible paths for public participation in Latvia:

- a. Activity initiated by a local community, including formulating the concept, gathering funds and hiring professionals to implement it.
- b. Action undertaken by an organization, often volunteer architects and urban planners, performed by the local communities.

The following paragraphs will review eight current examples of public participation in the construction field related to old buildings.

Initiatives of local communities

There are multiple examples of the involvement of small local communities in Latvia in the maintenance and preservation of existing buildings. These old buildings are not always recognized as national landmarks. However, they undoubtedly serve an essential function for the communities, providing them with a strong bond, often related to the local history. Residents of cities and villages are often entrepreneurial and “financially savvy”, and turn to external funding and possibilities of phasing work and paying for it in installments.

The primary school in Upīte is an excellent example of the region's vernacular wooden architecture (Image 3). However, the building



Image 3. The school in Upīte was established in 1910 and moved to this building in the 1950s. Image from the 1950s. [14]



Image 4. Current image of the school in Upīte [15]



Image 5. View of the panel house in Saldus (Google Maps, 2019)

is not recognized as an official landmark, and its significance is based on local history. This house was built from materials gathered from abandoned houses of several people who were deported during WWII. Expansion works were performed in 1956, 1974, 2000, and 2001. In 2008, the building underwent renovation, roof replacement, window replacement, and thermal upgrades (Image 4). However, due to the declining number of students, and

because the building was unable to meet the needs of a contemporary educational facility, it was closed in 2018 [16].

In 2019, the local community of Upīte decided to participate in an auction for this building and purchased it for 11,000 euros, including the surrounding sports area and park. It is to be paid to the municipality for over five years in monthly installments of 200 euro. Previously, the school was a place for





Image 6. Laba Vieta (eng. Good Place) movement – public-driven urban upgrade. Work in progress. Alekša Skvērs, Sarkandaugava, Riga [19]



Image 7. Laba Vieta (eng. Good Place) movement – public-driven urban upgrade. Completed work. Alekša Skvērs, Sarkandaugava, Riga [20]

cultivating the unique traditions and history of the region of Northern Latgale. The area is planned to be used for tourism, organizing local workshops, and selling locally manufactured products. This way, it can give back to the community [17].

A different example of the local community's activity was the need to improve the energy efficiency and thermal comfort in this residential panel house from the 1970s in Saldus (Image 5). The resident union applied for funding from the European Union, which covered about 30% of the total cost, managed the project themselves, and hired a contractor and a site inspector to oversee the work. The upgrades included installing exterior insulation on the facades and foundations, as well as the roof, window replacement in the apartments, window and door replacement in shared spaces, roof replacement and heating system replacement [18].

Architects' initiatives

Professional-driven initiatives have been popular in the last two decades in Riga as ways to strengthen the local identity and tighten the bonds between neighbors, while achieving a larger goal at a low cost.

The Labas Vietas Talka project (*eng. Good Place Talka*) is the largest of such initiatives, and was established as part of the 2014 European Capital of Culture, which was Riga. Three neglected neighborhoods were selected and redeveloped with the local communities. The project was performed by two NGOs, *Ideju Talka*, and the Information Center for Contemporary Architecture which is a group of professionals targeting urban upgrade issues.

The project received full funding from a Riga-based agency, funded 40% by the government, 40% by Riga City Council, and 20% from private sponsors. The residents' role was to voice their desires for the public spaces and then vote for the design ideas they liked the most. Then, they participated in the implementation event combined with workshops and celebrations. Alekša square in Riga was the location of the pilot project. It was selected as a trouble area of the city:

- The square was poorly maintained.
- Existing street furniture was damaged and/or missing.
- Due to inadequate lighting, the community did not feel comfortable being there by night.

The result provided walking spaces and areas for sports and games, as well as a mural (Images 6 and 7). Currently, the square is considered the focal point of the neighborhood [21].

The Good Place Talka continued into two subsequent locations, which were of a smaller scale. The Čiekurkalns project entailed a landscape upgrade, focused on open-air summer events, and was led by a landscape architect and students [22]. The Ziepniekalns location provided meeting spaces and information boards for the residents, and even some dance areas [23].

Another example of a professional-led *talka* is *Free Riga* – initiated by a group of artists and entrepreneurs, it is a concept of rejuvenating abandoned buildings in the center of Riga. The volunteers rent deteriorated spaces in attractive locations in the city in order to renovate them. In exchange, they receive free or low-cost space to organize creative events focused on contemporary art, interdisciplinary works and education. The benefit for the artists is that they do not have to pay rent, while the property owners receive free restoration assistance and property tax credits [24] [25].

Talka to maintain historic landmarks

The Daugavgrīva Fortress is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, as a place of high historical and cultural value of national importance [28]. Since the 12th century, there has been a Cistercian settlement and cloisters, which were then rebuilt into a castle, and eventually into a fortress. The fortress in its current shape was built in 1641 by the Swedes. However, it underwent multiple alterations as it moved from the control of various rulers [29]. Currently, it is only open on the weekends; however, it is not a popular destination to visitors from outside of the neighborhood.

Since the fortress remains a municipal property and awaits a significant investment plan, resources for restoration are limited. It has remained in this condition thanks to the preservation efforts of the local community and small non-profit organization, Bolderāja Group, who gathers there periodically to remove debris and clean up walking paths (Image 8 and 9). This *talka* receives co-funding for community involvement from the Education, Culture and Sports Department of the Riga City Council [30].

Another example of a historic building of national importance, built before 1872, is the house where Latvian landscape painter Vilhelms Purvītis was born (Image 10).

This house remained empty for decades, until it was purchased by a private Dutch investor, Margriet Lestraden, who performed the restoration herself with a team of Latvians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Russians. It took four

months to repair the roof and provide modern amenities like running water, electricity, a modern European flushing toilet, and a bath. It was also painted and restored to its original, traditional style. In 2018, the local community gathered, and a traditional *talka* was organized to help with the general maintenance of the house.

Over 100 participants gathered to help with the maintenance of the house, which included planting apple trees in the garden – a symbolic meaning of life and prosperity in the Latvian tradition. The *talka* was supported by the neighboring city of Ogre, Ogre Art School, and Latvian Forests Organization, and meals were provided by Latvian restaurants, a chocolate manufacturing company, and a grocery store [32] [33].

Conclusions

Throughout the history of the Baltics, its people were aware of and participated in collaborative work efforts known as *talkas*, well before the notion of “participatory urbanism” emerged in the mid-20th century. By engaging willing and able volunteers from local communities, the potential to achieve more with less becomes real. This is the essence of the Baltic *talka*.

Beyond the physical aspects of collaboration, there are other ways of getting involved like planning, design and implementation. The distribution of involvement between the local communities and other parties in the *talkas* are reviewed in Table 1. The study has highlighted the superior role of local communities, individuals and NGOs (26 cases throughout the *talkas*) vs. other actors (16 cases, which mostly include the



Image 8. *Talka* performed by the SAF Tehnika group at the Daugavgrīva Fortress [26]



Image 9. *Talka* at the Daugavgrīva Fortress [27]

Table 1. Reviewed case studies of Baltic *talkas* and involved parties.

<i>Talka</i>	Participating individual, group or organ																
	European Union			Government and public institutions			NGO or non-profit			Private companies			Individuals (architects, artists, entrepreneurs)			Community or volunteers	
	Originator	Funding	Contractor	Originator	Funding	Contractor	Originator	Funding	Contractor	Originator	Funding	Contractor	Originator	Funding	Contractor	Originator	Funding
Šventoji <i>Talka</i> in Lithuania				✓													
School in Upīte (built pre-1950s)																✓	✓
Energy efficiency upgrades in Saldus		✓										✓				✓	✓
Labas Vietas <i>Talka</i> - Alekša Skvērs					✓		✓				✓	✓			✓		
Labas Vietas <i>Talka</i> - Čiekurkalns					✓		✓				✓	✓			✓		
Labas Vietas <i>Talka</i> - Ziepniekkalns					✓		✓				✓	✓			✓		
Free Riga					✓								✓	✓	✓		✓
Daugavgrīva Fortress <i>Talka</i>					✓		✓									✓	
Vilhelms Purvītis house <i>talka</i>					✓						✓		✓	✓	✓		





Image 10. The house of painter Vilhelms Purvītis, 1946 [31]

foundatory role – 11 cases). The study confirms that local communities, volunteering individuals or groups can be successful in all roles of the construction process. The public's engagement in the various roles in the construction process helps serve as local empowerment and as a way to preserve the feeling of inclusion, identity, and belonging in the community. This leads to a more modern notion of *talka* where larger projects are concerned and the need for professional supervision is required. This type of guidance can prevent structural failure and unsafe construction practices, while maintaining the local architecture's historic authenticity.

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PRAWIDŁOWY SPOŚÓB CYTOWANIA

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Abstract: The stem of contemporary culture in the Baltics arose from the countryside and folklore. Among the traditions of the Baltic cultures, there is *talka* – a term derived from work in the field, which historically was the act of communal work of the village residents to help each family in their agricultural work, such as haymaking, rye harvesting, manuring, threshing, flax pulling, and breaking. Known in other countries as "bee", the term "talka" in the Baltics refers to voluntary community work. As the communities have been moving to cities, *talka* has followed them naturally. Currently, cooperative work efforts include maintenance of sites and buildings, and it is a frequent and widespread act.

The paper reviews examples of combined efforts of small communities to improve the appearance, performance, and security of public spaces. The application of joint work has allowed for low-cost gentrification and urban upgrade of several neighborhoods in Latvia.

Keywords: Latvia, talka, participatory design, participation, historic preservation

Streszczenie: KONSERWACJA ZABYTEKÓW A ZJAWISKO „TALKI" NA WSPÓŁCZESNEJ ŁOTWIE. Współczesna kultura krajów bałtyckich wywodzi się ze wsi i folkloru. Jedną z tradycji kultur bałtyckich jest *talka* – zjawisko, które historycznie było aktem zbiorowej pracy mieszkańców wsi i pomocy każdej rodzinie w pracach na roli. Podczas migracji mieszkańców wsi do miast *talka* podążała za nimi w naturalny sposób. Obecnie wspólne działania obejmujące utrzymanie osiedli i drobne naprawy budynków to zjawisko powszechne oraz regularne, a termin *talka* oznacza dobrowolną pracę na rzecz społeczności.

W artykule omówiono przykłady wspólnej pracy małych społeczności lokalnych, mającej na celu poprawę estetyki, funkcjonowania i bezpieczeństwa przestrzeni publicznych. Zaangażowanie społeczności pozwoliło na niskobudżetową gentryfikację oraz modernizację kilku dzielnic Łotwy.

Słowa kluczowe: Łotwa, talka, projektowanie partycypacyjne, partycypacja, konserwacja zabytków