



Semantic Message in Latvian Architecture

Topic: Architecture

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Abstract

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Can a human being perceive the semantic message of architecture from the surrounding environment in the cascading increase conditions of modern information?

How to reveal fully the informative emotional qualities of architecturally organized environment, preserving the semantic precision?

What is the semantic message in Latvian architecture inherent in?



Town Rēzekne of Latvia – semantic message of the ancient and modern architecture

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Key words: architecture, environment, information, semantic message, symbolism

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Semantic Message in Latvian Architecture

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During thousands of years long development course architecture has established its own characteristic language – the system of common signs or symbols which reflects the essence of this kind of art. In architecture the message is never neutral – the relations between signs and symbols have intrigue. When searching for harmony in the new and historic building interaction through movement, development and contradictions, dialectics of architectural forms is manifested clearly.

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Introduction

In every epoch human society forms its spatial environment appropriate to the requirements: it is not only either material or physical, but it is also connected with the development of spiritual culture, where architecture, taking into account the time and duration of the effects, has got a much bigger and more important emotional potential than any other art. Spending the whole life in space which has been organized in different architectonic ways, we feel an emotional effect, which causes diverse feelings [4].

The environment, in which we spend our lives, is a source of never-ending signals. The set of signals reflects the objective qualities of the environment and establishes a permanent visual background. Any piece of art, also architecture can provide relatively at least two types of information: the semantic one, which includes in itself the contextual or plotted moments of the piece of art, conceptual content, and the aesthetic one, which reflects the uniqueness, individual peculiarity of the particular piece of art and also architectural formation. Semantic information is based on common concepts or symbols, particular regulations of logic and psychology, which can be transmitted precisely with other means of expression, but aesthetic information cannot be expressed with any other means [5, 23].

1. Can a human being perceive the semantic message of architecture from the surrounding environment in the cascading increase conditions of modern information?

Human society has made a long and complicated cultivation journey since its developmental origins, changing significantly the knowledge and cultural level, way of thinking, mental structure of its every individual member, which are important in order to

create the surrounding environment and perception: human's physical perception cannot be separated from mental perception [5, 10]. The architectonic structures created by people also influence (Figure 1) and change (Figure 2) the varied natural environment and landscape of Latvia.



Figure 1 and 2. Architectonic structures emphasize planning elements in natural environment, and also create the planning of building structures. [7, 8]

In an open spatial environment different forms are integral – they are made by mutually related volumes or parts of individually closed rooms which have their own information [5, 25]. The semantic message of Latvia architecture can be read in the diversity context of natural and artificial lighting, colours of natural landscape (Figure 3, 4) and urban forms (Figure 5, 6).



Figure 3 and 4. Buildings of Turaida Castle in the changeable landscape – in winter and autumn. [9, 10]



Figure 5 and 6. Buildings of Old Riga in winter and summer. [11, 12]

A human being is always in a close contact with architectural creations, which in contrast to fine arts do not reflect, but rather create reality – environment for process developments of public life. The ideal of formal times was strength and fundamentality: a human being devoted their creative energy in order to create work with their hands which would last as long as possible [5, 19]. In Latvia monumental buildings highlight the peculiarity of landscape (Figure 7) and relief (Figure 8).



Figure 7 and 8. Bauska Fortress and Cēsis Order Castle – supplement and emphasize the landscape and highlight their peculiarity – waters and relief. [13, 14]

Perception of architectural creations does not usually happen momentarily, but rather in movement, when a human being moves during a certain time in a real space (Figure 9, 10). In such conditions one or the other type of information dominates [5, 24].



Figure 9 and 10. Koknese Castle ruins on the bank of the Daugava – the semantic message of ancient buildings from the outside and inside point of view. [15, 16]

In spatial environment participation and interaction of architectural forms take place. The spatial structures (Figure 11) exposed to a certain function express a semantic message [5, 26]. During the Middle Ages complex ensembles were created gradually till they reached an artistic harmony. Rebuilding ancient buildings, they were supplemented with annexes, developing the original idea in a creative way. Architecture has its own semantics, and symbols obtain a huge significance. Gradual complexity and diversification of spatial environment make us apply more often bigger groups of symbols or features in the analysis of the perceived information. Semantic or conceptual revelation of the surrounding environment most often happens regardless our will, and elements of different levels and structures take part in it (Figure 12) [5, 27].



Figure 11. Urban semantics on the Daugava bank. [17]

Figure 12. Riga. Buildings of the Holy Spirit's Convent. 1910s. [18]

Analysis of the medieval urban building complexes confirms that even in the most varied planning situations logic and understanding of composition can be sensed. In the spatial composition the principles of symmetry were not applied: balance was found between the placement of tower verticals and horizontal buildings. The compositional construction and interaction of individual parts in the common ensemble awarded the spatial construction some peculiarity, depending on the silhouette of the spatial system (outline) – vertical culminations of composition and plastic constructions of planning (horizontal mass compositions), which can be related to both its form (system of forms) in general and its individual parts [5, 45].



Figure 13. Silhouette of Old Riga from the Daugava River. [19]

An outline of a city or an individual building is fixed and its silhouette perceived already from far away in the background of the sky or surrounding landscape, which determines not only the first emotional impression, but prepares for and influences also the next aesthetic perception (Figure 13). From the point of information silhouette is one the most spacious elements of urban or spatial composition, which reflects convincingly urban semantics, peculiarities of surrounding landscape and building traditions. It is hard to overestimate its significance in order to state the quality of urban structure and emphasis of public importance. The silhouettes of the central parts of historical cities have a plastic expressivity and unrepeatable uniqueness (Figure 14, 15, 16), thus it is hard to mix up a silhouette of one city with a silhouette of another city: it quite often turns into a symbol and becomes an independent motive which is used in art [5, 45].



Figure 14. Peculiarity of Old Riga's silhouette. [20]



Figure 15. Expressivity of Old Riga's silhouette. [21]

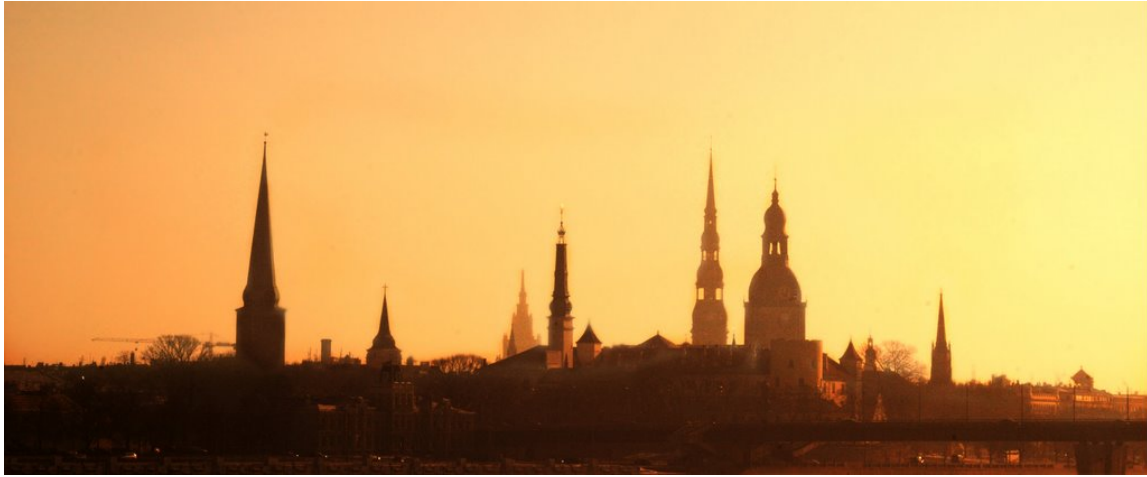


Figure 16. Old Riga's silhouette in its diversity. [22]

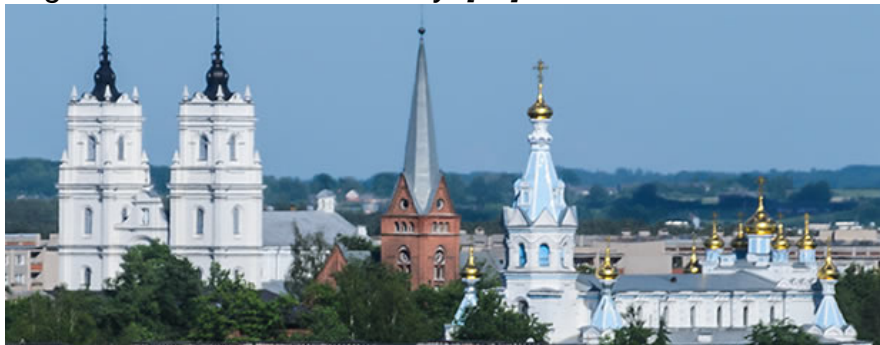


Figure 17. Architectonic verticals in the building panorama of Daugavpils Church Hill. [23]

Illusiveness has replaced imperceptible monumentality, stability and eternity apparent volatility which causes loss of interest about the neighbourhood, and people's attitude towards the place of residence has become erratic and changeable [5, 20]. Instability of people's relationships and tendency to temporariness is manifested also in the attitude towards bigger forms of spatial environment and architecture. Due to the increase of pace of life, speed of movements and complexity of communications a human being seeks intuitively support for stabilization of own internal environment – mental and physical comfort: relations with different elements of itemized environment become more temporary and unstable, and leave an impact on the human psyche and personality development. The increasing speed of changes influences a human being psychologically, changes perception of life and surrounding area, destroys soul balance. External acceleration turns into the internal and causes a need to search for new life stabilization techniques: an artificially created open space with diversity of forms (Figure 17) becomes a stabilizing factor of the human inner world. A primitive, elementary form creates minimal, even negative emotions.

2. How to reveal fully the informative emotional qualities of architecturally organized environment, preserving the semantic precision?

In the modern architecture underestimation of architectural semantic content is one of the drawbacks, which gives inevitably the building an amorphous nature, creates levelling of central and peripheral objects, loss of spatial peculiarity. When highlighting the significance of semantics, new opportunities appear to enrich architecture spiritually. Resurrecting the historical experience, the heritage of all rich historical styles, architectural forms and traditional building techniques are included in the arsenal of means of

expression – not as a range of constant canons, but rather for the impulse of different creative searches in order to emphasize possession of the building, its inner essence and place in the city. It is important to study more profoundly the experience of eclectic architecture and apply efficiently the architectural form arsenal of historical styles in revelation of the semantic essence of the building. However, unlike in eclectics, on the basis of revelations in perceptual psychology to refuse from a total and consequent historical form application in a certain emotional impression creation, apply only individual parts or cliché of forms. Architecture, without losing its contemporary essence, would obtain another time dimension and spatial confidence [6, 11–12].

Semantic precision (Figure 18) is a road to a spatial environment saturated with certain ideas and thoughts, in which a certain order, hierarchy of concepts and objects has been programmed. Nevertheless, the term “semantic articulation” does not mean creation of a stiffened system of canons, but to achieve such diversity of spatial forms (Figure 19), which, based on local dialects, would be able to influence every human being in the changeable world full of impressions [6, 12].



Figure 18. Kuldīga’s semantic precision. [24]

Figure 19. Diversity of spatial forms in Old Kuldīga. [25]

In the Baltic Regional architecture the demand for semantic precision means to give historical centres the lost unity of content and form and hierarchy of artistic expression, introducing the details of the local archetypical forms and applying the tiniest architectonic details and colouring nuances in order to award the important historical buildings (Figure 20), whose building site was justified by strategic, economic and aesthetic considerations, its original or similar to it function.

Eastern Latvian Centre of Creative Services “Zeimuļs” in Rēzekne (Figure 21) is situated near the hill fort with Livonian Castle ruins (Figure 22). The shape of this complex is created as a sculpture attuned to the relief and it provides a semantic message.



Figure 20. Semantic message of Rēzekne Castle ruins. [26]

Figure 21. Eastern Latvian Centre of Creative Services “Zeimuļs” in Rēzekne. Authors: architects Rasa Kalniņa and Māris Krūmiņš. 2012. [27]



Figure 22. Coexistence of ancient and modern architectonic structures in Rēzekne: castle ruins on the mound and modern building complex Eastern Latvian Centre of Creative Services “Zeimuļs”. [28]

Regardless the semantic progress, which causes emotionality, the human being's desire for environment rich in spatial structures can be implemented applying means of expression appropriate to the particular context and traditions, arranging purposefully architectonic space, increasing variety of formal expression and complexity of composition. In architecture the composition, which results from the content of the work and reflects life phenomenon in objective interrelationships, helps us implement the functions of space and its elements, unity of technically constructive structure and artistic expression [3, 30]. Due to the evolution of historical situations and public aesthetic opinions and architectural development, the compositional systems and techniques and mutual proportion of individual techniques change. Nevertheless, composition has lots of constant features, which obtain a legal significance – purposefulness of thoughts, design clarity, mutual unity of individual elements and conformity to the main factor, content and form relation, etc. Techniques of composition (Figure 23) cannot be turned into a dogma in order to avoid schemes of abstract compositions: in conditions of particular reality certain flexibility always has to be preserved and awareness of the opposite extreme – disregard of compositional rules and denial of architectural and artistic objective regularities [3, 31].



Figure 23. Purposefully arranged urban environment, applying techniques of composition formation. [29]

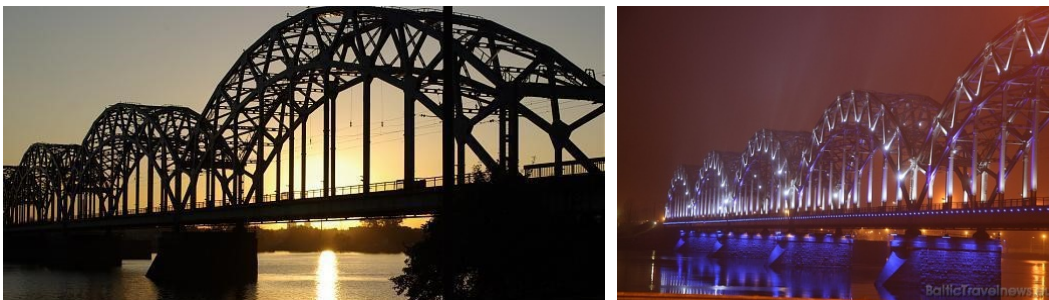


Figure 24 and 25. Lighting for significance emphasis of an architectural composition object. [30, 31]

The content of composition is determined by: the composition factors and elements WITH WHAT we compose, and composition principles of HOW we do it [3, 31].

An inseparably connected system influences directly WITH WHAT to make the structure of architectural composition: it consists of basic factors – function, form, material and construction. The function application efficiency has got a significant role in spatial environment formation [1, 15], which determines the form of the composition to be implemented in a particular material. The character of forms is related to the life development process, sociological requirements and psychological insights. A new material always enhances the language of forms and encourages to create absolutely new forms, which traditional materials have not got. Every material has got particular constructive possibilities of technical and technological peculiarities. In a successful constructive solution the material becomes more active: the deep mathematic logic of construction, which is a characteristic feature of modern architecture, provides the material with extra characteristics – heaviness, lightness, calm statics or turbulent dynamics. In architecture construction is a strong means of expression, which in combination with the material applied to the construction expresses a heightened emotionality [3, 31]. Expressivity of architectural composition (Figure 24, 25) is determined by auxiliary factors – light as a living factor, colour, which is always related to light, economic considerations, fashion and other auxiliary factors indirectly connected with the itemized environment, which only in a few cases determine the structure of an element [3, 32].

Choosing purposefully the most appropriate factors and elements, regulating consciously their mutual relations and interaction – every part of composition will obtain the most suitable place and role in a united ensemble [3, 136].

HOW to form the spatial environment is determined by the principles of composition: unity and harmony, the main and subordinated, centre of composition, emphasis and background, direction, dynamics and balance, symmetry and asymmetry, rhythm, contrast, nuance, equality, proportions, scale etc., which are the same in all kinds of art, but the specific means of expression are different, called as the technique of the creative work of art or architecture, which can be acquired during a long lasting professional training. In the creative process the performer's talent and individual abilities are the most important, which cannot be replaced by composition study [3, 30].

Unity is the basic requirement of architectural composition, as elementary as necessary, and the most unchangeable and ambiguous principle, which takes care of separate elements' harmony, creates an ensemble and unites all forms, constructions and rooms in one unit, since without a purposeful, organic relevance there is no composition at all. Unity describes the piece of art directly and it is the basic rule of its creation, which still does not mean humdrum: it is not the sum of separate phenomena, but rather a conscious merge of the separate categories into a whole inseparable unit [3, 135]. Unity does not mean that all parts in the composition have to be equally important: some factors, elements or principles in the particular case will be the main, others-subordinated to the main or dominance. Excellence and dominance can happen only in comparisons – in relation to other factors, elements and principles of the composition. The main can only exist at the same with the subordinated [3, 136]. The emphasis and background or the emphasized and the opposite of it – neutral, the subordinated is a very effective principle emotionally, which can be expressed in a multi-stage way. While there is the system of emphases, the stress can be only one. A principle of composition can also be emphasized: contract, symmetry, rhythm. The application of emphasis is varied – being much smaller in volume than the background, it is able to determine application of another compositional principle [3, 143]. The arrangement of structural elements in the compositional system is connected with information and motion concept in physical meaning, but orientation as a principle in emotional meaning is even more varied [3, 144]. Horizontal directions create the sense of peace and balance, vertical or growing directions create the spatial environment higher optically, but an oblique or diagonal direction is dynamic, creates the sense of motion and restlessness [1, 79]. Dynamics and balance or motion and rest are two opposite expressions of one phenomenon. Dynamics is movement due to a force effect. However, if the applied forces are balanced, there is no movement. A body is in balance – in a static state [3, 145]. The principle of balance includes the concept of stability, which characterizes the invariability of elements, statics, and rest, and is understood as mutually weighted arrangement of separate elements within one compositional group. The easiest way to implement the principle of balance is in a symmetrical composition, but symmetry helps to create balance (Figure 26). However, this is not the same as balance, the same way as symmetry is not a mandatory prerequisite to create balance. A balanced asymmetry can also exist. Dynamics is motion, instability; it is expressed also in asymmetry [3, 146], characterizes action and helps to emphasize it. Asymmetry, especially if out of balance, has a distinctively dynamic character. Dynamics more and more often is expressed not as a relative, but already as physical motion [3, 148]. Metrical rhythm is repetition of equal elements after a certain interval. However, free rhythm is much more complicated, as it leaves only rhythmical impressions and can be perceived with senses [1, 78], but enables a more flexible composition than the metrical. A rhythmical composition- either metrical or free – can be static, balanced or dynamic. The dynamics of rhythm is made of the orientation of the rhythmical composition and dynamic

structure of rhythm [3, 155]. Contrast – a distinct opposite, sharp difference [3, 157], is a very active emphasis, which creates an impression of activity, often also dynamics [3, 159] and gets stronger when the contrasting parts are placed close together to each other [3, 158]. Nuance – a small, subtle different, colouring [3, 157], but equality – lack of any differences, identity [3, 157]. Proportionality [3, 160] or mutual proportion of separate parts [1, 80] in the whole and also their proportion in relation to the whole [3, 160] is a very essential part of composition. Scale can be related to the proportionality of the parts in comparison with the standard – the human being [3, 163].



Figure 26. Complex of Rundāle Palace and purposefully arranged surrounding architectonic space. [32]

There are lots of options and it cannot be allowed to decrease the choice to just a few traditional techniques in order to acquire a lifeless scheme. In the diversity of practice the most suitable of equivalent solutions has to be chosen intuitively, by inkling. Spatial environment in its structure reaches also into art categories, therefore the emotional impact cannot be measured only with mathematical logic. In space formation one cannot do without the rules of composition and freedom of improvisation: a system is necessary – composition, and flexibility of the system – improvisation [3, 34].

3. What is the semantic message in Latvian architecture inherent in?

The famous Latvian architect, Professor Eižens Laube (1880–1967), whose professional erudition and knowledge in the theory of architecture was strongly expressed in urban building, wrote during the 30s of the 20th century: “If we allow Latvian architecture to develop apart from the leading, critical mind, then the obtained result will not be complete: the support of an important soul function will be missing. Architecture, which reflects its creators’ insufficient soul activity, cannot be worthy of modern and cultural

Latvia. Traditions of architecture have to be created. Sense alone apart from participation of mind and other soul abilities can take easily Latvian architecture to wrong paths and show its face wrongly cultivated. Peculiar and inherent elements in Latvian art should be composed into the content of Latvian buildings, therefore the essence of Latvia has to be acquired as profoundly and comprehensively as possible. The essence of Latvia has to echo in architecture, therefore it cannot be allowed to build in Latvia such buildings which are inherent to peculiarities of other countries. Buildings have to be inherent in compliance with the peculiar physical and spiritual surrounding (environment) of Latvia. Inherent and suitable architecture to the essence of Latvia has to be found absolutely consciously and purposefully. There are many and sharp controversial forms of expressions to implement Latvian beauty: it is not possible to have only one definition for Latvian beauty that would explain Latvian beauty in one sentence. Latvian beauty is implemented in many ways – according to different regulations in the most diverse conditions – it can be perceived and defined differently. The physical and mental environment of Latvia has to be researched, the land of Latvia and its treasures, peculiarities of nature, ethnographic regions have to be studied: local nationalities have to be acquainted, paying the biggest attention to the main nationality – Latvians, the political, economic and spiritual life of Latvia has to be understood, the peculiar pace of this life – what is the national character and cultural ideal of most inhabitants – Latvians, what are the goals of the new country? It has to be researched what the ancient historical Latvia was like and what the new history of Latvia is like. One should turn to the studies of local architecture, art and literature. The local traditional building techniques, the local useful and in building applied material have to be studied. We have to get acquainted with our urban and rural building peculiarities in comparison with what we see in other lands and countries in order to obtain ideas for further understanding of Latvian essence [2].”

After the First World War, when the economic life in Latvia had almost stopped completely – industrial enterprises were evacuated and closed down, country farms destroyed, huge courage was necessary to start thinking about the construction of the Freedom Monument, as no one had any idea about the amount of work required. Moreover, in 1915 the arrangement of the Riga Brethren Cemetery was started. Both monumental ensembles appeared in similar political, social and economic conditions; they have common historical roots, both were created at the end of the First World War and Latvia's national liberation battles and symbolize Latvians' desire for freedom. Sculptures express the semantic and aesthetic message.

Monumental sculpture can depict the cognition forms of dual worlds: it enables us to embody the real world into the material – both the animate and inanimate nature; it is able to reflect the spiritual world of an individual, community, nation and even the whole human mankind, character in all its depth. The viewable beauty in Latvia has helped to cultivate and develop the sense of Latvian beauty in people. If a particular object serves as initiative to reflect the real world, then the symbol is an expression of the spiritual world.

The Freedom Monument (Figure 27) is one of the most outstanding monuments of Latvian history, architecture and art, built in Riga as the symbol of Latvian freedom, which confirms the whole nation's respect and love towards the fatherland and its freedom. Sculptor *Kārlis Zāle*, belonging with his heart and soul to the native land, being together with it in its destinies, creates an inspiration to include universal ideals, distinct symbols in the Freedom Monument in general and in separate images, which not only reflect the philosophical purpose of freedom, but also Latvian nation's historical impressions about the embodiment of freedom battles and national physical and spiritual power. The Freedom Monument is crowned with an allegoric image of Latvia.

Four cultural and historical regions of Latvia – Semigallia, Courland, Vidzeme and Latgale are depicted in the four sculptures of the Brethren Cemetery (Figure 28). On the

left and right side of the Mother's image on the closing wall of the memorial ensemble city coats of arms have been carved. The city heraldry has also been reflected on the ancient Latvian soldiers' battle shields. In the Brethren Cemetery the main symbol has been embodied in a woman (Mother Latvia, Freedom, Family). The semantic message is expressed by the grieving Mother's image of Latvia, in which the masculine heroism, exquisite power can be felt more than the feminine lyricism.



Figure 27. Riga. The Freedom Monument, opened on November 18, 1935. Authors: sculptor Kārlis Zāle (1888–1942), architect Ernests Štālbergs (1883–1958). [33]

Figure 28. The Brethren Cemetery, opened on November 11, 1936. Authors: sculptor Kārlis Zāle, architects Aleksandrs Birzenieks (1893–1980), Pēteris Feders (1868–1936), gardener Andrejs Zeidaks (1874–1964). [34]

Latvianness is closely connected with Latvians' land, which gladdens us with the calming beauty of forests, green freshness of trees, splendour of smelling flowers, and where the most characteristic expression is looked for with the means of architecture. In Latvia already in ancient times a type of farmers' settlement – a farmstead (Figure 29) and random villages, which sometimes were quite densely built, was found. Buildings were placed around a closed yard, where on one side the residential building was placed, but on others – household buildings. Nowadays ecological, structural and functional changes take place in the rural landscape of Latvia. Amatciems was created changing the relief, in whose planning (Figure 30) the idea and traditions of the traditional Latvian farmstead were included. The low-rise residential buildings of the village are placed among waters and clumps of trees, and they merge beautifully with the landscape.



Figure 29. Baltic farmers' traditional farmstead buildings. [35]



Figure 30. Modern solitary building in Amatsciems, Latvia. [36]

In Latvia during lots of centuries rural landscape and urban environment rich in natural and architectonic forms has developed, which cannot be imagined apart from the cultural values and traditions, which were started to be cultivated in the Republic of Latvia between the wars (Figure 31). Wooden buildings have become a part of rural environment: its artistic expressivity is determined by the inherent four-sided or two-sided roofs or the two-sided roofs gabled at the ends. Solutions are being looked for in order to develop the visual image of modern detached houses in towns, countryside and outskirts of modern Latvia, which originate in historical building (Figure 32).



Figure 31. Ķemeri resort house “Jautrais Ods” (“The Happy Mosquito”) with a reed roof of reeds built in Latvian style. 1933. Architect Fridrihs Skujiņš (1890–1957). [37]
Figure 32. One of the modern detached houses in Amatciems, Vidzeme. [38]



Figure 33. St. Peter and St. Paul's Catholic Church in Saldus Town, Latvia. 1999–2008. Architect Aigars Andersons. [39]

Latvian building characteristics can also be encountered in public buildings and even churches. In Saldus Town St. Peter and St. Paul's Catholic Church of an unusual form – asymmetric planning and covered with sloping roof planes has been built (Figure 33).

Conclusions

- 1 The space of diverse forms can only be perceived dynamically, being in motion: spatial environment leaves an impact on human mind, creates a particular mood and causes spatial experience. The increasing pace of changes influences the human being psychologically, changes environmental perception. The common aesthetic result of the visual interaction can be very varied, depending on the individual's direct interest, cultural level and other factors, as well as the real spatial quality which has been achieved during the harmonization process of the surrounding environment and the new artificially created spatial formation. In Latvia in most cases the architectural semantic message can be read in an open spatial environment in the direct presence and context of natural elements.
- 2 The impact of architecturally arranged space on the human being is comprehensive. Spatial environment is visually joined in an inseparable unity. It is possible to reveal informatively emotional qualities if the physical and spiritual surrounding of the space has been cognized which enables us to create precise notions of the character and essence of the corresponding spatial form, state the highest poles of the semantic precision, for when losing the conceptual unity, the space becomes harder to be perceived. The loss of semantic precision promotes aggression of visual information.

- 3 Symbolism is inherent to the semantic message in architecture of Latvia that is based on traditions, history and nature studies.

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