

Jump from Isolation to Globalization: Planning in Latvia

This paper presents comparative analysis and discussion about precondition of planning in Latvia during the changing conditions of the last century: from capitalism to “soviet socialism” and back to capitalism on the way towards the EU and globalization.

The paper is based on the case study of urban development strategy in post communist Latvia and participation in the projects of urban and rural spatial development in the last years.

Background

Among the ten countries surrounding the Baltic basin Latvia ranks the eight according to size and fifth according to the population density in its cities. Among the capitals of the countries, Riga stands out with a high population density level (806 thousand inhabitants – 33% of the total population, or 49% of the total city dwellers). Of all the countries surrounding the Baltic Basin, only in two – Estonia and Denmark we can see a similar disproportion in city population. The sharp contrast between the number of inhabitants in the capital and that of other cities (“the principle of hydrocephalus”), caused by urbanization, is one of the distinct characteristics of inhabitant accommodation in Latvia.

Crashing of the existing planning structures and inserting new bases for land-use and spatial planning in the period of soviet socialism (1940-1990) realized the plain isolation from the world and Europe with the experiment of enormous scale. The legal and economical fundamental was: the state as single landowner, elimination of private property and industrialization of economics. The countryside was performed due liquidation of separate private farms and organization of the collective farms (kolkhozes) with new rural villages. The cities and towns were performed with large scale building of new neighborhoods based on the principles of Athens Charter.

After the crash of USSR in 1990's and restructuring the independent Latvia the land-use reform was beginning with reduction the crumbled structure of the land properties.

The development of urban and rural settlements with respect to their structural and architecturally compositional aspects in the renewed Republic of Latvia is closely related to the transformation of the existing productive forces and the management of the national economy. In spite of the unfortunate course of events, which have befallen the Latvian people, a comparatively dense matrix of historical towns and rural settlements as well as the communication network joining them has been preserved. Today there exist 76 towns, more than 600 rural settlements and 150.000 clusters of farms and individual farms. From the 2.46 million inhabitants in the Republic of Latvia, 1.7 million (69%) live in towns and 760 thousand (31%) live in rural settlements.

In the place of breake off economic links with Russia began the prompt development of expansive contacts with Europe and world. This process brings up the new objectives of urban and rural spatial planning as: enlargement of spatial structure scale (regions, districts), extension of land properties (from 10 ha to 500 and more ha), sustainable urban development (density, traffic, mixed land-use etc.). The way to solve these complex spatial problems should be strategic planning on different scale levels. Early 90th basic concepts was elaborated (Trusins 1993) with following alternative country development strategies:

1/ „Latvia – Plant” based on the adoption of the existing (Soviet heritage) economic infrastructure to principles of market economy and new socio-political stances.

2/ „Latvia – Farm” can be easily identified when recall the economic model of the 30thies, i.e. preoccupation period, when Latvia was a „suburb of Europe” isolated from East and opened to the West. Self sufficiency, moderate trade and favorable atmosphere were national cultural traits of Latvia's development in the 20thies and 30thies.

2/ „Latvia – Bridge” essentially and unprecendent situation when Latvia is open to both the East and West with adequate priorities of trade, transport and tourism.

Spatial Planning in Europe: New Patterns?

Ten central and eastern European candidate countries will be ready for EU membership in 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), and 2007 (Bulgaria, Romania). With this perspective, EU enlargement towards central and east Europe with all its economic, social and environmental implications on European space has entered a more specific arena (Pallagst 2003). Spatial planning on European level can contribute to creating democratic and more effective governance structures in these countries and to fostering the benefits of knowledge exchange on a European scale.

A borderless network society has caused a fragmentation of powers. This is true for many countries due to its limited space and open economy (D'Hondt 2003). We become aware that planners have to work for an increasing diversity of organizations. Therefore we have to deal with continuously changing planning concepts, strategies and working methods. Spatial planning becomes so diverse that planning as a clear-out discipline has disappeared. However there is a growing need for a new understanding of urbanism to stimulate better decisions on spatial development. We should be concentrating on organizing the spatial decision making processes. According to Patsy Healey (1997), planning is "managing co-existence in space" through 'sharing and shaping spaces' in our fragmented 'network-society', a market-focused society, where the drive for ever expanding markets has led to the commodification technologies. Spatial planning really is how we intervene in the processes of spatial development in order to create a different and hopefully more sustainable structure (Nadin, 2000). Spatial planning operates at different scales: local, regional and increasingly at the transnational and cross-border level. Spatial structure is the distribution of built and natural features and this is altered through a process called spatial development.

During the half century of the soviet occupation the industry potency of Latvia had increased fifty times. Such an economic growth without local sources of raw materials and sufficient labor power was the expression of total functional zoning strategy of the Soviet Union. The consequence of such strategy on a local level was the intense industrialization, urbanization and flow of about 1 Mio. immigrants from Russia and other Soviet republics, what has lowered a lot of the Latvian nation from 75% in 1940 to 52% of inhabitants in 1991.

All land was owned by the state; there was no market value and no location variances due to market forces. Only public or communal bodies could make development decisions.

Theory and practice of urban and regional planning based on the principles of Athens Charter and ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The main goal - economic development determined the strategy of urban and regional planning, based on a rigid compartmentalization and location of activities on the basis of function. Housing, industry, commercial areas, green spaces, etc. are physically separated and linked by an extensive road and transport network (Green Paper 1990). The functional zoning, dedicating large areas of cities and country to single functions only is the most important cause of ecological damage and energy wastage (Krier 1993). The contemporary process of privatization, agrarian reform, realization of the market economics, denationalization, demographic policy and other factors bear a respective overall impact upon the local planning strategy of post communism period in Latvia. The general tendencies are characterized by transition from absolutizing of economic criterion to priority of social and human values in the urban planning. Little by little the ecological criterions and ideas of sustainability break in our common life, but the sustainable urban planning is quite a problematic topic.

Sustainability and Globalization

The way to sustainability is one long, hard way and we make (do we?) the very first unsteady steps toward this fundamental goal. We have to bear in mind that ideas of sustainability are born about 30 years ago and are coming to us through the concepts of Doxiadis (1975), Club of Rome with the famous slogan "think global – act local" (Peccei, 1977) and global development

models of Jay Forrester (1968) and Denis Meadows with his partners (1972), that provoked the Summit of Rio de Janeiro and further campaign towards sustainability. During the 20 years the patterns of global development have had no changes and needs for further basic changes (Meadows, 1992). We, architects and planners, have our own niche in the framework of ecological sustainability. The Aalborg Charter (1994) is the basic document to develop and introduce the ideas of sustainable urban planning. Therefore the concrete concepts of reconstruction of cities and towns need. The realization of an ecological urbanism, agriculture and industry are the most critically urgent and at same time challenging tasks of industrial civilization. For 200 years technological changes have been revolutionizing structures and modes of civil society; the emerging ecological morality is now in turn changing industrial technologies and imperatives beyond recognition. The ecological challenge lies in the territorial reorganization of industrial society in toto (Krier 1993). We must to educate a new generation of spatial planners with global sustainable thinking and train our practicing colleagues in changing their approach to actual problems.

The recent European Commission White Paper (CEC, 2001) on "European Governance" claims, that "decisions taken at regional and local levels should be coherent with a broader set of principles that would underpin more sustainable and balanced territorial development within the Union"

We have to begin with system-analyze of city structure (Radzicky, 1996) and elaborating of decentralization concept as basis for the new city structure with autonomous, self-governing urban districts. The main task of restructuring is the reducing of macro-functional zoning of the city as whole and redeveloping the existing suburbs and mono-functional zones into complete urban quarters, where urban industries and workshops will be guaranteed cheap development plots with aim to create local employment and enterprise encouraging small economic circles of supply and demand. The prohibition of urban zoning practice should be one of main demand of urban development program.

By providing homes, jobs, shops and basic facilities within easy walking distance of each other, it reduces dependence on the car and makes for a better quality of life; a mixture of uses and close community are fertile ground for enterprise and new employment; a flexibility in the master plan and the buildings allow the urban village to adapt incrementally to changing needs. The consequence of elimination the city's functional zoning and making a poly-centric city is economy of land, energy and time, reducing the unnecessary mobility and use of motorized vehicles. It means radical change the principles of transport system and communication network in city answering to main criterion - minimizing the consumption of energy. Reducing of transport mobility promote to improve the global climate to slow down the process of development the greenhouse effect. In the master plan of Riga we can refuse the development of speedways through the city area, except one - Via Baltica. The construction of four new bridges need the complementary analysis with the aim to save the municipality sources for changing the functional structure of the city and reducing the mobility of citizens. It makes no sense for citizens to pay for promoting the development of transport mobility to get in the future the increased pollution of environment - local and global.

It seems that the new suburbs of Riga (Imanta, Purvciems, Plavnieki, Solitude, Kengarags) are more suitable to make new structure units. They are designed as residential districts including some number of neighborhoods with communal service system and education network. The humanizing of built environment, reconstruction of already existing dwelling houses, creation of new job vacancies and arrangement of services can transform in short-time period the sound 'bedroom district' into complete self-supporting urban unit with minimal needs for mobility. Mixed land-use in these districts with the relationship between transport and infrastructure location will promote the sustainable development of city.

Local Problems and Strategies

The contemporary situation of transition in post communist Latvia on the way to EU promises a very high possibility of realizing the strategy "Latvia - Bridge between the East and the West" with appropriate priorities for tourism, trade and communication.

The elements of this strategy on the national level are:

1. Reduction of the manufacturing sector, which requires imported labor power and raw materials. During the 50 years of Soviet occupation the level of manufacturing in Latvia had increased more than 50 times. Such an economic growth without local sources of raw materials and sufficient labor power was an expression of the strategy of total dominance by the Soviet Union, aimed at the strengthening of its occupation of the Baltic States.
2. Comprehensive enhancement of tourism and recreation industry, stressing national characteristics. The long (500 km) seashore with sandy beaches, many lakes and rivers, large tracts of forest covering nearly half of Latvia's territory and many historic city centers are rich resources for tourism and recreation development, in use since the 19th century. Restoration and adaptation to new functions of rural public centers and estate ensembles as well as the old parks, cemeteries and alleys with an aim to restore the traditional emotional aesthetical hierarchy of the rural landscape.
The number of tourists in 1938 was 84 thousand, mainly from Lithuania, Estonia, Germany and Poland. In 1988 the volume of tourist flow reached 1 million people, mainly from the Soviet Union. In 1995 only 341 thousand tourists came, because the flow from Russia and other former Soviet republics dropped sharply after the restoration of the independence of Latvia.
3. Stimulation of environmental development and protection of rural landscapes and forests, rehabilitation of natural and built environment, development of sustainable cities and towns. The purpose of this step is to counteract Soviet policies of industrialization and centralization, turning to the liquidation of the kolkhozes and the regeneration of the traditional farmsteads. The next step should be the stimulation of rural tourism, upgrading and equipping the small towns, reconstruction of objects of interest to tourists (Charter 1994). Visual reconstruction of Latvian traditional rural landscape by removing production buildings of the former collective farms, transforming and improving standardized dwelling houses and public buildings so that these structures should merge into the local landscape etc. Reconsideration of approaches and practices in making master and detailed plans taking into account the reestablished private ownership to land and real estate.
4. Humanization of the built environment, with improvement of social and spiritual quality of life. This element would encompass the concept of mixed land-use, reconstruction of existing dwelling houses, increasing density, creation of new jobs and transforming 'bedroom districts' into complete self-contained urban units (urban villages) with minimal need for commuting and mobility [Krier 1993]. Seeking for feasible ways how to humanize and socially improve the social environment of the huge urban housing estates making use of all architectural and artistic means of expression. Elaboration of building codes which would respect the regional context and traditions and be compulsory for urban and rural development.

The following basic principles of the tourism activities (Trusins, 1991), which should determine an attitude toward the environment and structure relations inside the system are suggested:

a. Sustainability

Only those forms of tourism and recreation should be developed, that respect a diversity of nature, enhance the cultural and social environment, avert overloading and pollution of natural resources and the physical environment [National Plan 1995].

b. Intensification

All forms of tourism and recreation processes need effective maintenance of resources, based on the attractive recreational scenarios.

c. Hospitality

The physical and psychological level of comfort during the entire recreational experience maintained and improved, supplying the tourists with necessary information, service and personal security.

d. Mobility

Successful tourism and recreation is based on the change of experience of seeing different natural and human environments and observing diverse activities. The sharper this change, the more attractive and effective recreational process may be.

Conclusions

1. The Soviet occupation of 1940 was the begin of isolation Latvia from the context of Europe and world development process and and compulsion of 50 years living in the environment of communist ideology and economy with the iron state planning system that up to now provokes the allergy from planning in all post-communism states.
2. Renewing the independence in 1991 gave Latvia the possibility to return in Europe and prepare the incorporation in EU to profit by the experience of spatial planning and basic guidelines of the global strategies.
3. In the Soviet Union Latvia was a "small piece of Europe" with high level of culture and education. What will be the role of Latvia in the EU? The border state with functions of defense, transit and tourism. Those development patterns shows the strategic model "Latvia – Bridge" supported with global strategy of sustainability.
4. In the concrete historical situation Latvia have to make a jump from isolation to globalization, eliminating the recurrence of many years development experience in Europe.
5. Immense importance for realizing the jump have all-round and diverse education system with objective to release the society from stereotype of Soviet thinking and to prepare the professionals of spatial planning who will be able together with consumers and residents to arrange and organize the human environment of high quality.

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Short outline/lead of the Paper

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The paper presents comparative analysis and discussion about precondition of planning in Latvia during the changing conditions of the last century based on the case study of urban development strategy in post communist Latvia and participation in the projects of urban and rural spatial development in the last years. After the crash of USSR in 1990's the land-use reform was beginning with reduction the crumbled structure of the land properties. In the place of break off economic links with Russia began the prompt development of expansive contacts with Europe and world. This process brings up the new objectives of urban and rural spatial planning as: enlargement of spatial structure scale (regions, districts), extension of land properties (from 10 ha to 500 and more ha), sustainable urban development (density, traffic, mixed land-use etc.). The way to solve these complex spatial problems is strategic planning on different scale levels. The paper elaborates some strategic visions of regional and local development of Latvia. The role of Latvia in the EU as border state with functions of defense, transit and tourism due the strategic model "Latvia – Bridge" supported with global strategy of sustainability is discussed. In the concrete historical situation Latvia have to make a jump from isolation to globalization, eliminating the recurrence of many years development experience in Europe.

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