

Opportunities for revitalising the outdoor spaces of historic town centres in Zemgale

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Abstract. The study examines the processes of transformation of urban infrastructure and the ways and tools for revitalising the outdoor public spaces of a historic centre. Changes in the historic centres of Auce, Bauska, and Jelgava and their functional layout were identified. A study of usability levels and outdoor public spaces in the historic centre was carried out, resulting in an assessment of the outdoor public space. Based on the study, spatial proposals were made for the development of the historic centres of the three cities.

The transformation processes in the urban environment affect social issues, transport infrastructure, land use, water issues, etc. Transformation is taking place at all levels today, from global economic, political, and social structures to the ways the outdoor public space is planned.

With the trends of the early 21st century, historic squares are moving towards the revitalisation of these historic locations through recreation and quiet leisure: concerts, exhibition areas, café terraces, also reviving the character of historic fairs. This spurs possible business development, increases the value of property, encourages the presence of green structures, and the introduction of regulation for protected areas in old towns to discourage possible unauthorised activities by their residents. Negative factors in historic centres include urbanisation, physical deterioration, climate change, marketing, and functional obsolescence.

Urban revitalisation is viewed as a multi-sectoral strategy that includes the development and implementation of policies in the fields of urban planning, transport, economy, urban development, and sustainability. Solutions can be developed based on different time frames: short-term, cyclical, seasonal, and long-term. The purpose of revitalising the outdoor public space is to improve the social, functional, economic, ecological, and historical aspects of an area through a variety of revitalisation tools.

Key words: outdoor public space, revitalisation, transformation, comfort, cultural space, urban environment, spatial structure, compositional axes

Introduction

Outdoor public spaces contribute to the sustainability of urban environments. These include green spaces freely or partially accessible to the public: parks, gardens, squares, waterfronts, promenades, streets, and other areas for public use [11]. Different definitions have been used to determine what an outdoor public space is. It can be defined as the totality of land and water areas in an urban environment that are not covered by buildings or paved surfaces, as well as any undeveloped land within the city boundaries [5]. Another definition is that an outdoor public space is an area freely accessible to everyone [8].

The uses of outdoor public spaces have many facets. For children, it is gardens, parks, and playgrounds; adults working in the city can spend their lunch breaks in parks, gardens, or green spaces, helping reduce their everyday stress. Cemeteries are not only an eternal home for the dead, but also a place where a sense of emotional balance can be achieved [10].

Together, outdoor public space and its blue/green structure make the strongest contribution to the urban environment when set in the context of the structure of the cultural space, its 'canvas'. Both the compositional structure axes and the spatial landmarks are visible.

As the populations of cities are growing, the quality of life in them is becoming ever more important. The outdoor public spaces of a city must be designed to cater to and provide for the activities that people need. Often, local citizens are unaware of the activity and its use in outdoor public spaces. Citizen activities that take place in public outdoor spaces can be divided into 3 categories: deliberate or necessary, optional, and social. Each of these groups of activities puts very different demands on the physical environment. All the groups of activities are in constant interaction with each other, in different combinations [4; 10].

The *goal of the study* is to make proposals for revitalising existing passive street sections that play an important role in the context of the spatial structure. The research is related to the compositional structure of cultural and historical building development.

The *objective of the study* is to look at the historic centres of Zemgale's cities and to assess small sections of streets that represent potential development opportunities for revitalising the outdoor space.

The *research method* is based on the assessment of the usability of the outdoor public space, taking into account the structure of the existing developed

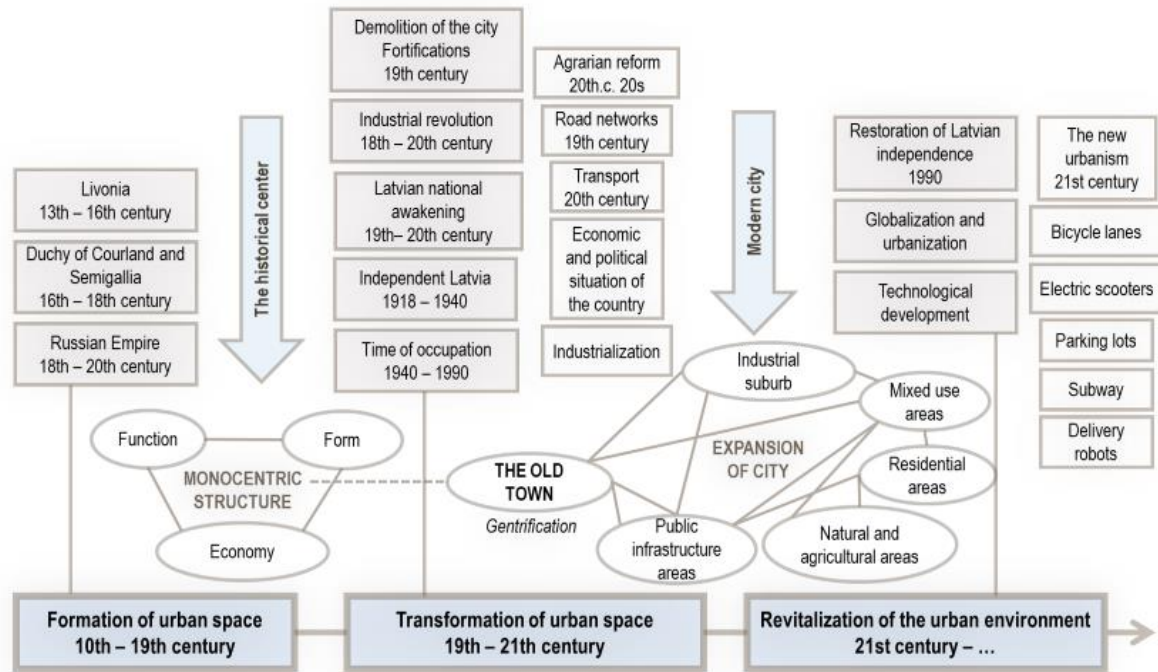


Fig. 1. Historical development of Latvian cities [diagram by authors, 2022]

area, the blue/green areas, and the street network. In order to refine the spatial compositional ‘canvas’, a survey grid of approximately 100x100 m, or 1 ha, was used with the cartographic material, marking the structure of the existing small streets.

The grid method is formulated following four criteria that emphasise the use of a particular urban space and are related to unifying aspects: green/blue structure, street structure, building density, and points of interest [10].

Green/blue structures include urban parks, gardens, pastures, squares, fields, protected areas, floodplains, water bodies, bank slopes, etc.

Street structure includes traffic ways and pedestrian lanes.

Density looks at the intensity of buildings in the urban environment.

Points of interest include museums, the town hall, schools, shops, petrol stations, and other public facilities.

Materials and Methods

The use of outdoor public space includes several groups of activities:

Deliberate use of public space: going to school, work, shopping and waiting for the bus; these are independent of the physical environment. Nevertheless, the quality of people’s daily lives could be improved if the spaces in which deliberate activities take place are well designed and managed [4; 13].

Optional activities are described as ‘if you have the wish and the time’ and can include walking outdoors, standing, sitting, or sunbathing. As these

activities are optional, they only take place if the weather or the location makes the activity desirable. Optional activities are, therefore, highly dependent on the quality of the outdoor public space and the environment [4; 13].

Social activities are seen as an evolution of the necessary and optional activities. They depend on the presence of at least one other person and can include children playing, conversations, community activities, and passive activities such as looking at and listening to other people.

The design and management of the physical environment can clearly influence social activities in urban space [4; 13].

Benefits and advantages of outdoor public spaces in urban areas

Outdoor public spaces play an important role in social life. This includes public areas that people use deliberately for activities that they choose freely. Advantages and benefits of outdoor public spaces in urban areas: strengthening the community based on the presence of nature, presence of historical heritage, and support for the local economy. To understand the city’s current infrastructure situation, it is important to know the historical development and the role of the historic centre today.

Carefully planned outdoor public spaces that provide options for all activity groups play an important role in building quality of life, well-being, positive social communication, and the economic value of the city [1]. Benefits and advantages of outdoor public spaces in urban areas:

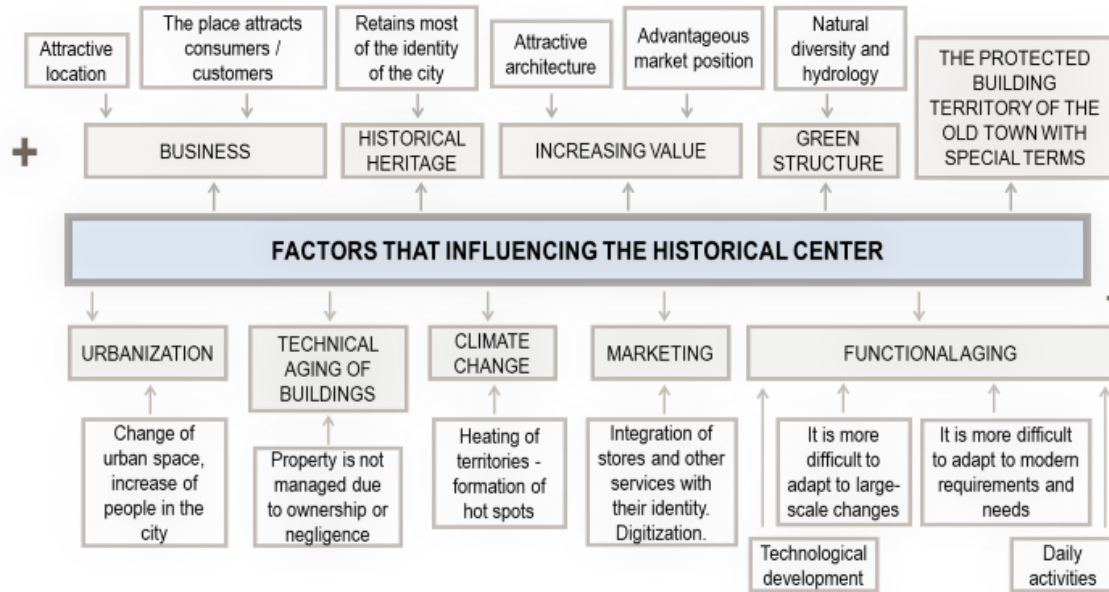


Fig. 2. Factors (positive/negative) affecting historic centres [diagram by authors, 2022]

Strengthening the community

- Safety and vigilance: public outdoor spaces encourage outdoor activities and foster a sense of safety and vigilance, reducing vandalism and crime.
- Attractive, organised community: well-kept squares and walking areas increase the attractiveness of the community and neighbourhood for its residents and guests.
- Raising self-esteem: public spaces promote healthy, active lifestyle, both physically and emotionally.

Cultural historic heritage

- Vibrant cultural and historic urban environment: outdoor public spaces bring people together for festivals and cultural celebrations.
- Preservation of history and identity: maintaining the unique features of the city and educating its residents about the city's heritage.
- Personal growth and development in children: public outdoor spaces create stimuli for children and increase their attention spans, also offering a better learning environment.
- Interaction between cultures: a shared urban environment where people from different cultures meet.

Living space

- Peace and relaxation: greenery creates a private space that provides tranquillity, absorbs street noise and bright lighting.
- Stress relief: for pedestrians and vehicle users in green spaces.
- Health benefits: outdoor public spaces enable walking, cycling.
- Lifestyle improvements: walking trails, sports centres, playgrounds improve the experience and daily life of city users.

Balancing economic issues

- Tourism: creation of job opportunities, boosting the local economy.
- Retail: a green structure attracts shoppers, boosting economic growth.
- Property value: owners and guests value the regional landscape, accessibility, and the recreational services offered.
- Reduced costs: green structures reduce temperatures in summer and the cost of rainwater management.

Presence of nature

- Reducing summer heat: greenery cools the city.
- Trapping dust and air pollution, reducing car emissions.
- Storing moisture: plants release water during evaporation.
- Reducing soil erosion: dense vegetation prevents topsoil from washing out during floods.
- Improving water quality, preventing harmful chemicals present in the soil from entering bodies of water [3].

Historically, public outdoor spaces were seen as areas for strong economic development, which, in addition to the regular nature of working days, allowed for a variety of activities on market days and on Sundays after church services. The church, market, and town hall squares of the old city centres were particularly crowded on Sundays.

Farmers brought in carts and sold everything that townspeople needed for a week. From one Sunday to another, time was arranged to create strong subsistence farming circulation between the countryside and the city. The historic city centre had a multi-layered role, economically, politically, socially, etc. Traditionally, a corner of the square was also open for social entertainment with merry-

go-rounds, festivals, etc. At the beginning of the 20th century, before the world wars. The old town squares began to take on not only a purely utilitarian character, but also a political one, with rallies, political gatherings, suppression of protesters, military parades, etc.

With the trends of the early 21st century, historic squares are moving towards the revitalisation of these historic locations through recreation and quiet leisure: concerts, exhibition areas, café terraces, also reviving the character of historic fairs with traditional dancing events. This spurs possible business development, increases the value of property, encourages the presence of green structures, and the introduction of regulation for protected areas in old towns to discourage possible unauthorised activities by their residents. Negative factors in historic centres include urbanisation, physical deterioration, climate change, marketing, and functional obsolescence [12].

Urban revitalisation is viewed as a multi-sectoral strategy that includes the development and implementation of policies in the fields of urban planning, transport, economy, urban development, and sustainability [5]. Solutions can be developed based on different time frames: short-term, cyclical, seasonal, and long-term. The purpose of revitalising the outdoor public space is to improve the social, functional, economic, ecological, and historical aspects of an area through a variety of revitalisation tools.

- Temporary solutions: an additional function created in an urban space for a short period. This could be an exhibition, a festival, a theme park, or other solutions.
- Cyclical solutions: annual recurring events in public spaces, like weekend fairs.
- Seasonal: different uses introduced across the year, such as having a skating rink in winter and a football pitch in summer.
- Long-term solutions: providing an independent function for the site, such as setting up a playground (with the possibility of transforming it) in an urban space.

According to sustainable urban development experts, 66 % of the world's total population will live in rapidly growing urban/suburban areas by 2050 [9].

The countries and cities of the world are more interconnected today than ever before, thanks to new technologies that have led to a high technological level, with the improving condition of roads and the speed of movement between populated areas [7].

Transformation processes in cultural, natural, and technological fields are resulting in a new spatial structure and scale. The connections between the city and the areas outside it can be monocentric directed towards the city centre or polycentric in

mutual interaction in areas adjacent to the city, with the interactions taking place between the population centres of the outer city. Wedge-shaped, ring-shaped, radial. The pressures of urbanisation are related to job opportunities, education, leisure, events, and other phenomena. Low-fertility agricultural areas close to urban spaces are increasingly being transformed and lose their functional role under the pressure of urban sprawl.

The study examines the processes of transformation of urban infrastructure and the ways and tools for revitalising the outdoor public spaces of a historic centre. Changes in the historic centres of Auce, Bauska, and Jelgava and their functional layout were identified. A study of usability levels and outdoor public spaces in the historic centre was carried out, resulting in an assessment of the outdoor public space. Based on the study, spatial proposals were made for the development of the historic centres of the three cities.

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Results and Discussion

The assessment of the outdoor public space of a city is done for the area of the historic centre using 6 criteria based on the identified aspects of outdoor public space revitalisation: social, historical, functional, economic, green structure, and visually aesthetic quality.

Each criterion is scored on a scale of 0 to 3, indicating the presence or absence of the aspect in the area. The results are reflected in the urban development models. The results show which aspects already exist in the historic centre's outdoor public space, and which can be developed.

The historical parts of three towns in the Zemgale region selected for the study, cover an area within a 10-minute walking radius, off an impetus for development forecasting.

In each historic city centre, this small 10-minute-walk area has a visible green/blue structure, compositional axes of the streets, development density, and points of interest.

For the analysis of the green and blue structures of the **historic centre of Bauska**, the eastern part of the historic centre between the Town Hall Square (Rātslaukums) and Kalēju Street was selected, which clearly marks the 'canvas' network of the development there, consisting of streets and gardens.

The 300 m long section of the left bank of the Mēmele River in this area forms an information-dense superstructure to the historical mosaic of

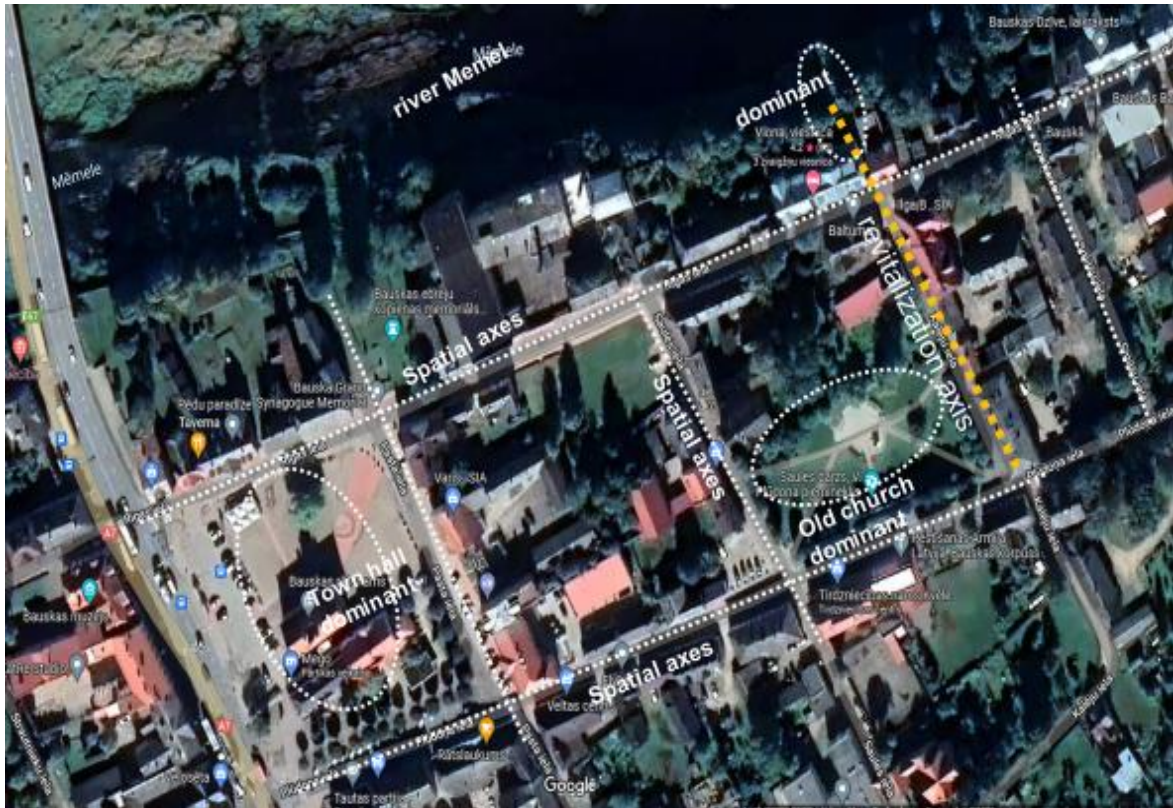


Fig. 3. Looking for a spatial compositional 'canvas' for the Town Hall Square in the historical centre of Bauska [drawing created by authors]

buildings between Rīgas, Kalēju, and Plūdoņa Streets, and the Town Hall Square. Two striking landmarks can be found in this area: the restored Town Hall (Rātsnams) and its spire, and within 100 m from it, the ruined church.

The ruined church here creates a strange feeling of something that has been lost but is still present, the emotion created by the proportion formed by the large, oversize free space in the garden, nestled between densely packed small wooden houses with tiled roofs. This scale discrepancy inserted in the historic fabric of the city building development (holes in the 'canvas') undeniably creates a sense of lost buildings, of transformation processes.

The site of the ruined church has a clear longitudinal axis as well as a transverse axis, which hints at the need to restore the development. It would undoubtedly be a costly and complex process, but the revitalisation of the historic centre is possible, with:

Kalēju Street serving as the transverse axis and connecting the garden of the ruined church to the left bank of the Mēmele;

Plūdoņa Street serving as the longitudinal axis connecting the Town Hall Square to the garden of the ruined church.

Both axes form a zone strongly attractive to tourist infrastructure within a 10-minute walk area, which includes several activity locations: the Town Hall, former site of the synagogue,

terraces of the steep bank of the Mēmele, etc. These are very powerful cultural and historical landmarks, holding together a small piece of the 'canvas' of the historic centre.

The urban fabric of the area was severely eroded during the war, as the historic wooden buildings at the intersections of Saules/Rīgas and Saules/Plūdoņa Streets disappeared, creating wide gaps in the urban development fabric. Taking the place of the buildings which disappeared, there are giant trees that create an adverse impact on the old buildings with their foliage and root systems (at Rīgas iela 18). The huge branches, the weight of foliage on the roofs and drains of the houses in autumn, the settlement of chlorophyll from green leaves on the exterior walls: all this leaves a major impact on the fabric of historic buildings.

The architectural language of Plūdoņa, Rīgas, Kalēju Streets can set a strong course for revitalisation by using undeveloped land plots, turning green areas into concert gardens, summer entertainment venues, workshops by artisans of historical crafts (restorers, blacksmiths, woodworkers, potters, small shops of butchers, bakers, coopers, etc.) or small indoor spaces offering historical crafts skills. This functional scenario is dictated by the existing scale of the historic buildings and the architectural style of the 1880–90's.



Fig. 4. Looking for the compositional and spatial 'canvas' of the historical centre in Jelgava between former Town Hall Square and St Anne's Lutheran Church [drawing created by authors]

This is complemented by the rich density of green spaces of the historic part of the city, with front gardens and courtyards.

The Bauska Town Hall Square is a reflection of the city's identity, and a popular tourist and event venue. Currently, the western edge of the Town Hall Square is taken up by a car park, which demonstrates the inability to capitalise on the very economically attractive use of the heritage site as a outdoor public space. The Town Hall Square has several compositional axes and can be revitalised through several scenarios of a long-term, seasonal, cyclical, and short-term nature. The revitalisation proposals have to do with looking for landmarks clearly marked by the intersections of the axes. One of the proposals could be to install a sculpture, seeking proportion and harmony between the Town Hall, the perimeter development of the square and its scale. For example, if the Town Hall Square is to represent a 17/18th-century historical mood, the spatial scenario will undoubtedly be linked to Duke Jacob and outdoor exhibitions on historical topics using the latest technologies, which could also be done at the underground level of the square, using impact-resistant glazing in metal frames for the ceiling (glass, lighting, digitisation).

The left bank of the Mēmeles and the spectacular sight lines across the river make a very strong contribution to the revitalisation of the historic buildings in this urban area, providing an opportunity to develop promenades along the

waterfront. This urban space zone sees the development of solutions that incorporate historical, visually aesthetic, environmental, economic, social, and functional aspects.

An analysis of the **cultural and historical space of Jelgava** with its green and blue structure template clearly shows that the highest potential for building activity demand in the city is along the Driksa and Lielupe rivers. One part of the historic centre, the former Town Hall Square (Rātslaukums), now the Market (Tirgus) Square, is successfully used in various celebrations. The trees planted in the square date back to the post-war years, when the city centre burned down. As it happened, only the outer perimeter of the historic centre remained, with wooden buildings and streets 300 m away from it.

The western part of the outer edge of the historic centre of Jelgava has a different scale and a different building development 'canvas' structure compared to the historic centre of Bauska. Currently, this part of the city only provides historical and visually aesthetic quality. Survey data also show that the historical, aesthetic, and economic quality of the area is seen as low. Pedestrian streets in Jelgava are neutral: they only provide a transit function and do not encourage visitors to stay in the area.

The study focused on a small area, selected using the 100 m grid method described above, along the historic axis of the building development, the western part of which is spatially dominated by St Anne's Lutheran Church, and the eastern by the location of the

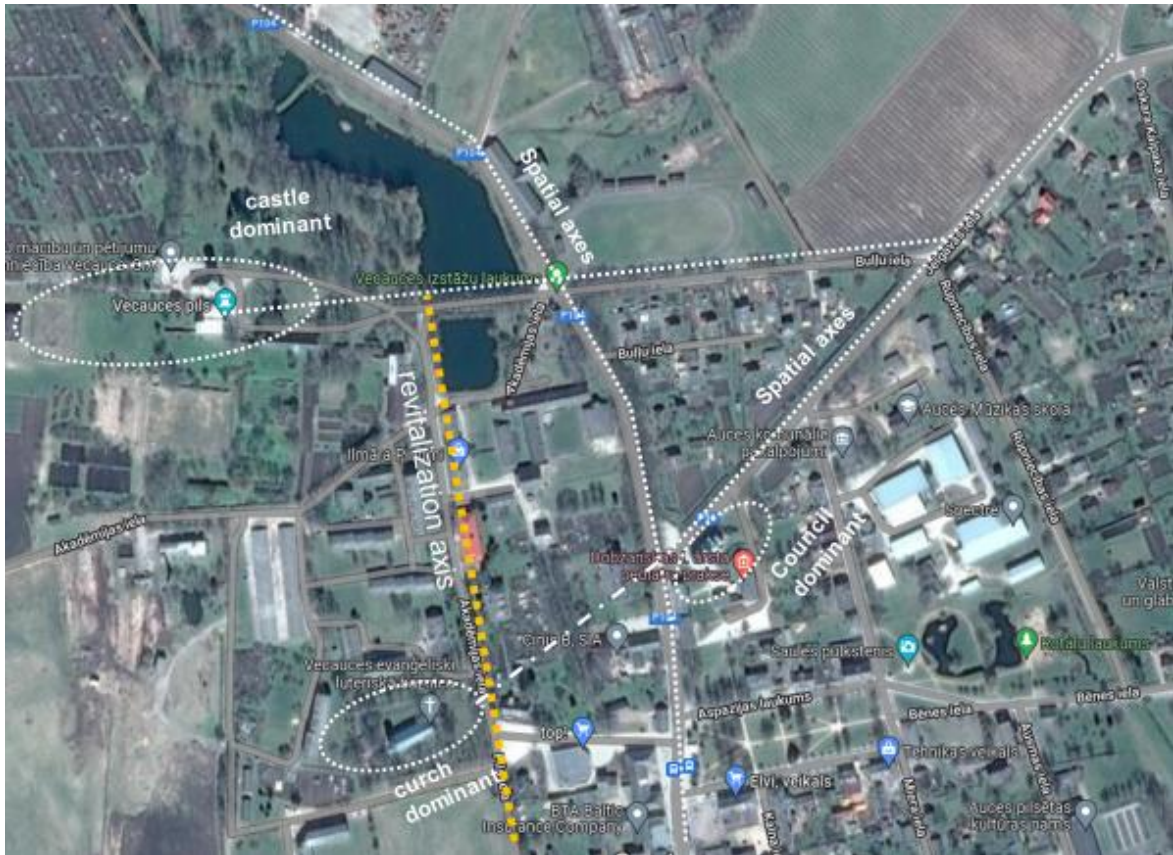


Fig. 5. Looking for the compositional and spatial 'canvas' of the historical centre in Auce between the manor building ensemble and the Lutheran Vecauce church [drawing created by authors]

former Town Hall Square. The historical structure is similar to that of Bauska, but with the opposite situation of the Town Hall being gone, but the church remaining.

In the 1960/1970's, a large industrial building was constructed next to the church (a controversial building); its scale contrasts sharply with the structure of the historic buildings. The industrial area developed in the post-war years as an extension to the existing Baron von Kramer's lock factory built in the 1880's. Architecturally, the exterior of the old factory consists of ornate clay brick facades with a pilaster rhythm, giving the building a playfully light architectural language. A beautiful industrial heritage building. The post-war extension has heavy forms with prefabricated reinforced concrete exterior wall panels, which contrast sharply with both the church and the architectural style of the old factory building, ignoring the scale of both the protected zone and the cultural space.

For the proposal of the historic centre revitalisation, Kr. Barona Street was selected. It goes along the former longitudinal axis of the city canal, which connects the church with the former Town Hall Square. This spatial axis is crossed by the axes of Pulkveža Brieža and Mātera Streets, forming an enclosed block. The revitalisation proposal is made for the northern part of Mātera Street. The approximately 100 m long pedestrian zone passes through a 10 m wide tunnel-like development, whose western edge is covered by

continuous factory buildings, and the eastern edge by a 5-storey residential building. So there is a corridor-shaped pedestrian transit zone (Mātera Street as a cross axis), which goes into the middle of the historic longitudinal axis. The renovation proposal, with the revitalisation of the little street, includes the provision of a number of glazed artisan workshop spaces alongside the impersonal brick wall of the factory, with pergolas, zones of low shrubbery, and terraces.

Long-term, cyclical, seasonal, and short-term solutions for revitalising the outdoor public space, encompassing historical, visually aesthetic, environmental, economic, social, and functional aspects.

The longitudinal axis with landmarks at both ends can be revitalised with tree rows or avenue greenery, inserting a green wedge into the urban space.

The recovery of the bed of the historic channel is foreseeable in the future.

The **historical centre of Auce** began as a manor house ensemble and the construction of the Lutheran church, retaining its historical name, Vecauce (Alt-Autzen in German).

The two buildings form a single spatial axis, which is completed in the northern part by the terraced elevation of the manor garden, behind which, at its highest point, is the location of the majestic Neo-Gothic-style Vecauce manor house,

creating a strong landmark at the northern end of the compositional axis.

At the southern end of the axis, there is the Lutheran Vecauce church with a garden. Since the 1960's, the compositional axis, over 200 m long, lost both its laconicism and the long sight lines from the hill of the manor house to the church. Large apartment blocks and hangars came instead, disrupting the elegance and fragility of the language of the architectural form, the 'canvas' of the structure, already mentioned in the explanation of the methodology.

In revitalising the spatial axis, one must take into account that Auce does not have a distinct city character with a dense population that could enable stable and high economic growth in the town based on a strong expansion of tourism infrastructure. Unfortunately, the administrative division reform downgraded Auce from the capital of its own municipality to a parish centre, which also has had a certain impact resulting in a decline in the popularity of the place.

The revitalisation aspect of this historic site can be pursued by focusing on the restoration of green lines or rows of trees, or the avenue which would visually and spatially suppress the impersonal character of the post-war development. The green promenade between the church and the manor house would revitalise the city's outdoor public space, which has been weakened by the disproportion and mismanagement of the occupation period.

A perpendicular axis running west to east connects to this axis of the composition, strongly accentuating both the manor house and the tree row of the access road. The two axes are complemented by a diagonal one, forming a single triangle, whose dominant is not only the church, but also the new former school building built in the 1920's. It was proudly placed there as a striking contrast to the former cultural space of the Baltic Germans, to represent the Latvian spirit of freedom. The brick architecture of the building and its pomposity that mimics the pilaster rhythm and the turrets of a manor house, are in a way in architectural competition with the historic Neo-Gothic manor house of Baron von Medem. This sight line is obstructed by a poorly positioned tree row which hides the church as a landmark.

The spatial triangle as a whole forms a strong cultural historic centre, with very prominent sight lines that have been lost over time.

The spatial triangle with three dominant landmarks, each pointing at the dimension and relevance of its time:

- north-south axis: revitalisation process planting rows of trees;
- west-east axis: the historic tree avenue;

- diagonal axis (Jelgavas Street): revealing the sight lines to the church.

Conclusions

Looking at the development plan of each of the cities, as well as their historic centres, very distinct in terms of their scale and architectural composition, clearly shows that each of them needs a revitalisation process. This is what the early 21st century demand, and Latvia, needs to take a serious step towards the beginning the revival of its historic city centres. The global examples reviewed and the literature research materials referred to in the study provide excellent evidence of this

The legacy of the Soviet-era buildings from the 1950–70s, which are now in intense competition with the cultural and historical items of value in Latvian cities, can be most quickly dampened in the context of outdoor public spaces by setting up green recreational areas, pergolas, terraces, pavilions. It is a tool that can be used to create a temporal expression format for circulation within outdoor public spaces that is:

- long-term,
- cyclical,
- seasonal,
- a short-term solution for revitalising the public outdoor space.

The temporal expression format contains information related to:

- historic,
- visually aesthetic,
- environmental,
- economic,
- social,
- functional aspects.

The transformation of the urban fabric is linked to the political and economic processes, and new technologies entering urban spaces. The outdoor public space in the urban environment involves its deliberate and optional use in everyday life; it is strengthened by the community, the presence of historical heritage, providing opportunities for the development of the local economy. The tools for revitalising the outdoor public space include social, historical, functional, economic, and environmental aspects, and short-term, cyclical, seasonal, and long-term solutions. The studied areas do not have an independent use that would invite visitors to stay in the outdoor public space of the historic centre.

The stories of Auce, Bauska, and Jelgava are closely linked in the context of the Zemgale region. The difference between them was brought about by the devastation of war and the totalitarian ideology of the post-war years. Each of the revitalisation sites can exist at four temporal levels: short-term, seasonal, cyclical, and long-term.

Today, town events are organised in historic centres. A few venues can possibly be created in Auce, Bauska, and Jelgava by revitalising certain street axes. These are places that currently cannot even be noticed, but they have immense potential that must be used both in architectural/spatial terms and in functional use.

This study and its methods can be also used in other research of the outdoor public space of the historic centres of Latvian cities. Its results can now be used at the municipal or regional level: in spatial planning, local planning, or joint projects. To increase the objectivity of the results, the assessment method can be conducted by involving the perspectives of various professionals.

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