HISTORICAL SCHOOLS AS THE CARRIERS OF LOCAL IDENTITY IN RURAL SETTLEMENTS

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Abstract

Dominant and regionally vitally important historic settlements are very diverse in structure as they depend on the political, economic and hierarchic model of the society. In the countries, that have still or till lately dominant agricultural history, the significant part of heritage is situated not just in the rural areas but literally between fields and pasturelands. Estonia, irrespective of the empire it was currently part of, was an agricultural society that based on serfdom from late Middle Ages till nearly the end of 19th century. The land was divided between 1200-2000 manors and run by about 200 noble families. Aside parish churches, the manors were the main regional institutions influencing local life. The abolishment of serfdom in the 19th century, but finally the establishment of a nation state in 1918 marked the end of the manor-centred lifestyle in rural areas and gave way first to modern capitalistic villages and later, after World War II, the kolkhoz centres. Despite the changes in the society and many negative aspects in history of serfdom, the manor buildings have in a way preserved or regained their role in the society as regional centres of culture and education carrying new functions and identity. The current article is dedicated to this change of role, related ambitions, value judgements and problems. It is based on previous studies, articles and also daily work of the author as the coordinator of the EEA Grants 2009-2014 Manor School programme "Preservation through use".

Key words: *Manors, schools, preservation, function, funding*

Introduction

Estonian history can be characterised by several interruptions. Situated on the borderline of East and West it has been a part of political ambitions and turbulences of European politics through centuries. All eras have left behind their tangible and intangible legacy, the value of which has been re-evaluated several times. The various traces of the past form all together the national heritage that is to be accepted, interpreted, protected and preserved by the authorities and the citizens. Estonian identity is widely dependant on its agricultural history, this argument is supported by the fact that 70% of individually protected monuments of architecture are situated in the rural areas. Contemporary Estonia is faced with a dramatic urbanisation that leaves rural areas empty and turns them into peripheries. To optimise the costs many basic services are collocated to bigger centres. This includes bank and postal services, shops etc, but also public institutions like libraries, schools, etc. But cost-effectiveness in one sector causes often unsurmountable responsibilities in the others. Not only Estonian heritage authorities, but for example also institutions that are responsible for the

security, but in fact the society in general is faced with the challenge to find appropriate use to abandoned protected buildings.

One of the biggest challenges is the maintenance of manor complexes that have played a central role in Estonia's economic development, history and culture, as well in the shaping of its physical environment. Manors are undoubtedly the pearls of architecture in Estonia and serve as textbooks of the history of architecture. The different phases of protection and preservation of manors will be discussed below.

Historic background

Since the Christianisation in the early 13th century, Estonia, alike Latvia, has been conquered and ruled by foreign landlords– Germans, Danes, Swedes, Poles, Russians, etc. The foreign noble families that settled here were later collectively known as the Baltic-German nobility as their common language was usually German and also their cultural identity followed mainly German traditions. Although the country was governed since 16th century either from Stockholm or St Petersburg in an agricultural society the local landlords influenced much more the daily lives of Estonians than the regulations from the capitals of empires Estonia has been part of. The native people – Estonians – remained mostly peasants; social rank was tied not only to whether one was propertied, but also to one's nationality and this separation has been the basis not only for the turns in the course of history but has predefined also the acceptance of the symbols of the past as national heritage.

Officially the serfdom was abolished with the acts from 1816 and 1819. But due to the delay of other linked reforms, the situation of peasants started to improve only decades later and serfdom in practice was abolished only by the mid 19th century. By the end of the same century many Estonian peasants finally became landowners themselves. The painful past of serfdom was one of the key catalysts of the process of national awakening in the second half of 19th century. In 1919, shortly after the 1918 establishment of the Republic of Estonia, a very radical Land Act expropriated the majority of the land from the nobility and divided it among the peasants. In 1920 the Act of the Abolishment of the Ranks followed. In the wake of this legislation, the majority of the aristocrats sold the buildings that remained on their lands, since they could not maintain them without income from the surrounding farmland.

From that point forward, the states of mind towards the physical legacy – the palaces and household buildings – of the Baltic-German landowners' have been extremely conflicting: these rich wide open buildings and financially essential edifices are likewise architectural and cultural mastery and dedications of rank society and regularly harsh remote nobility.

Toward the start of the twentieth century there were around 1200 manor complexes all over the country. Among their extravagant structures were numerous moderately new ones: starting in toward the end of the eighteenth century the expanding abundance of the privileged permitted them to start supplanting their prior houses. Thus numerous house complex structures date only from the end of nineteenth and early 20th century till the outburst of World War I.

Protection

The first Conservation Act of Estonia was enforced in 1925. As one of the main activities the compilation of the registry of cultural monuments started. Although it mostly concentrated on the monuments from Viking Age and Middle Ages some of the manors were listed already in 1930s. Reconciling with the 'alien' heritage caused several debates. (Jõekalda, 2014). In 1936 already

more than 30 manors were listed, of course those of outstanding architectural value.. Still taking into account the recent political change and background, and in many cases a rather thin layer of patina, the overall acceptance that the legacy of former landlords was also Estonian national legacy, was relatively mature. Despite some protective measures many other manors were demolished as building material or left in decay.

During the Soviet occupation the legacy of the landlords became a suitable negative example to support the narrative of class fight, this attitude predisposed the growing neglect. The first registry of monuments from Soviet period dates to 1947 and it listed 10 manors. But aside the political choices that registry reflected also the physical condition of monuments after the war demolitions and also the ambitions of new master plans. In first order the former list was updated by adding objects that were in actual danger of demolishment and concentrated mostly on towns. The small number of manors in the list may also be substantiated by the fact that manors as rural buildings were at that time not threatened by either demolishment or development, many of them were just neglected or vice versa in use, usually as public premises.

In 1964 some dozens of manors were listed but only from a selection of counties where some research had been carried out. The list of 314 architectural monuments of 1964 was nearly doubled in 1973 adding 275 new objects, majority of them were manors. During the following decades more manors were listed (Alatalu, 2012: 114). The acceptance of manors as heritage had been rehabilitated in connection with a creation of Lahemaa National Park in 1971, the first national park in Soviet Union and the overall strenghtening of heritage protection activities in Estonia. Lahemaa was in 1970s a unique territory where both nature and cultural heritage was evaluated, paying attention to different layers of legacy from archaic farm buildings to festive mansions. Lahemaa became a role model in many senses. Among followers were also the directors of the collective farms. By the 1970s Estonian kolkhozes had become wealthy enough to have architectural ambitions and many unique designs for kolkhoz centres and other buildings were commissioned from popular architects. The second popular option was to restore local manors as an un-spelled symbol of continuity of the noble life of the landlords (Eesti küla, 1983).

These restoration activities were encouraged by the systematic inventories made by heritage protection institutes in 1974-1978 (Hein 2014: 100-107).

Restoration of Estonian independence and the accompanying surge of interest in Estonian heritage meant manors enjoyed a special status. Even though sovereignty and democracy were the main values of the period, the stylish, glamorous manor complexes were seen as representing traditional European architecture. The way the history of the nobility and manor culture were laid meant the roots of Estonia's European identity ran deep, were visible, romantic and stunning.

One after another books and albums on manors were printed and became bestsellers. The former national self-pitying rhetoric of 800 years of serfdom, torture and injustice was replaced with pride for European noble legacy. The history of the nobility helped to re-integrate into European cultural space. The former nobility had mostly no legal right to apply for the return of their former property. Unlike the property that was nationalised by Soviets, the manors were nationalised or given up during the first period of independence and thus were not the subject to the Property Reform carried out in 1990s. Still the noble families all over the world shared the overall excitement of change and many of them generously supported the reestablishment of the once flourishing culture from nostalgia for the lost homeland.

Also people with money started to buy prestigious manors. Those who could not afford a manor enjoyed the success stories in media or travelled around the countryside in weekends.

The adoration of the architecture of the nobility i.e. former symbols of wealth reflected the beginning stratification of the society after the restoration of independent state in 1991. A new

social group of businessmen had taken advantage of making money already during perestroika; the manors became a possibility to ennoble their position in the society. But huge and demanding complexes turned very costly to maintain. The projects built up on the uncertain hope for easy income, donations and foreign aid failed quickly and in many cases the condition of the buildings grow quickly worse in private ownership. Weak financial culture and ethics lead into dishonest methods and court cases. Several manors became an object of dubious investment and scandals of well-known people "decorated" with their vain property. National Heritage Board was in the turbulence of transition powerless in making malevolent owners take care of the property. Several manors nearly collapsed, some were even set on fire for insurance fraud (Alatalu, 2012: 114-117).

But the manors created also the unofficial stratification of monuments. Although the overall scale of monuments broadened constantly the manors have monopolized most of the attention of the conservators and the public since the 1980s. In Estonia there are nearly 5300 monuments of architecture; from those more than 2000 represent the culture and economy of manors, while only less than 400 stand for the legacy of peasants (Registry, 2015). The comparison gives an unwanted indication that the National Registry of Cultural Monuments highlights the majority of preserved legacy of the former nobility, but overlooks the heritage of Estonians who were forced into lower rank.

Still the above mentioned 400 farmhouses, cattle sheds, windmills, rural inns etc were almost all listed during the Soviet occupation, in addition to their ethnographic value, a label of the legacy of "working class" was noted. After the rediscovery of manors, the listing of ethnographic heritage stopped almost completely and little was done to promote its importance. Only the recent years have shown the change in the priorities.

New functions

In the course of nearly 100 years from the abolishment of ranks the main challenge for the preservation of manors has been the use. One of the biggest call-outs was the separation of buildings and arable land, the characteristic that aside political changes separated their destiny from the similar big estates in Nordic Europe.

There is no precise statistics on the condition and usage of the manors as not all of them are listed in the National Registry of Cultural Monuments. Roughly 500 main buildings of manor complexes have preserved till our days (Praust, 2015), out of which 284 are protected. The number of preserved outbuildings is by speculation around 3000. Although more than half of the main buildings are gone the density of manors is still too high to find a profitable function to each of them in the sparsely populated rural areas.

In 1919 1065 estates were expropriated from the nobility. Implementing the Land Act the state offered local governments to take over the manor buildings for public use. Since then the manors have housed several public institutions like nursery homes, orphanages, hospitals, municipalities, libraries, community houses, forestry centres, etc. In 1920s the most common decision was undoubtedly to use them to better the poor situation of classrooms. Over the last century, schools have operated on some 300 of the manors.

There were many reasons for the interest in converting the manor buildings to schools. As a part of building up a new sovereign state much attention was turned to the education of the citizens. Among the school system reforms, the compulsory term of study was lengthened from the third grade to the sixth grade. The number of students increased and the classrooms had to be more spacious and the school network became tenser than ever (Mälk, 2015).

Many manors underwent reparation works to modernize them and adapt to the needs of a school, still due to limited means the changes were often minimal.

The reasons for closing manor schools in different decades have been different. The most dramatic years were 1941 and 1944 when retreating battalions torched a number of school buildings that had been adapted for military needs during the war. However, the first schools were moved out of mansions already in 1920-1930s when municipalities regarded manors as temporary solutions and started to build contemporary school houses for growing number of children. Next wave of abandoning manors was in 1960s in accordance with starting urbanisation and also the consolidation of small kolkhozes. The reasons of ongoing decrease in number lie in the overall problems of regional development. The progressing urbanisation saw a short exceptional period – a number of rural schools, including those on manors, were opened or re-opened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time when society was gripped by independence fervour and many idealistic people returned to rural areas to rebuild agricultural society. Unfortunately the dreams proved to be unsustainable and, the closure of manor schools continued fairly immediately after the Republic of Estonia regained independence, also building of new school buildings ceased and many schools were shut down completely.

However in comparison with other institutions the schools have been the most consistent users of the manors. While many social and health care institutions have moved out of historic mansions, there are still 69 schools in manors. Most manors where a school has operated consistently are now in satisfactory and generally very good or even excellent condition.

Preservation through use

At the turn of the millennium the number of schools, vocational schools and children's institutions operating out of manors stood at 65. These included vocational educational institutions, nursery schools and orphanages. Actually, there were many more manor schools than that. Many of them did not identify themselves as manor schools as they were situated in the outbuildings, many others faced with the threat of closure dodged the inventory. Even in the past few years, we have spotted educational institutions that operate out of a manor but are not part of the manor school movement. As of 2015, there were a total 69 manor schools.

Two dramatic processes characterize re-independent Estonia from the perspective of manor schools: the drop in the birth rate and rapid urbanization. From 2000-2014, 126 rural schools were closed and 41 rural schools downsized or converted to nursery schools instead (Laanoja, 2014) Of the 1,147 schools operating in 2015, that makes up 11% and 3.5%, respectively. During the same period, 15 new schools were opened, five of them in municipalities adjoining capital city Tallinn. But three new ones operate in old manor buildings in different regions of Estonia.

Estonia remains fairly evenly covered by the manor school network. One in five rural schools is located in an historical manor house.

The impact of school closures has multiple effects on regional policy. On the face of it, it seems pointless to keep a school open when student enrolment is in the single digits; then again, if education becomes the biggest logistic challenge for the whole extended family, even the last young families will leave and it's almost certain new ones will not move to the area. Going back to the land and settling in the countryside is a clear trend in today's society.

Alongside regional policy, educational theory and security risks also suggest that manor schools have the advantage of offering a small, student-centred learning environment. There has been a sharp increase in the need for a child-centred learning environment that enables an individual approach and helps raise intellectually balanced people who respect society.

From the standpoint of heritage conservation and sustainable development, Estonia, sometimes even promoted as a land of 1,000 manors, needs to find a use for all those splendid countryside edifices, and a school is one of the best-suited functions. As a school, a manor is a unique place to learn and grow, and these buildings are also open to all. After the closure of a school, it is difficult to find a new use for a cultural monument, at least one that is just as good. Many manors have entered its decline right after the school, orphanage or similar moved out.

Even though around 500 of the onetime mansions – more than a third – are left today, there are not enough potential owners for every manor. In spring 2015, about 40 manor houses were listed on real estate websites – about 10% of the extant ones. The construction of a new building can save money on heating and maintenance if we consider only the needs of the building itself, but money will still need to be found for preservation and revitalization of cultural heritage in future. It should be stressed that manors are generally very well-constructed buildings and it is easy to adapt their interiors to use as a school.

The biggest challenge is to organize physical education classes in the manor schools. Since Soviet times, there have been quite many cases where basketball hoops or jungle gyms were mounted in ballrooms. One of the characteristic features of classic manors, the arrangement of the rooms in long enfilade, even allowed hurdle races to be held indoors. In recent years many manors have managed to accommodate unique athletic facilities that exemplify the best of contemporary architecture in the midst of the existing manor complex.

The manor schools movement

Although the previous paragraphs stress that schools helped to maintain the historic buildings, this argument has to be seen in the context of the era and in comparison with living quality of the time. In the 1990s, when Estonia opened to the capitalist world many manor schools were in very lamentable condition according to new contemporary standards; many even lacked running water. Local governments started doing what they could to bring them into conformity with the new requirements fixing or replacing roofs, constructing water supply and sewerage systems, updating heating and ventilation, installing new electrical systems. But their own funds only sufficed for partial repairs.

The top priority was to comply with health codes and rescue board requirements – and thus new plumbing, kitchens and emergency exits were tackled first. Only a few manor schools underwent full-scale repair and restoration.

A number of the manor schools situated in distinguished historic buildings had to go it alone. Soon local leaders and school administrators realized that the patchwork repairs were not producing satisfactory results: relying on only their own knowledge ended up wasting the limited funds. Manor schools with the same goal found they needed to unite, share experience and develop plans for the future.

In 1998, the initative of one basic school director led the establishment of the Järva County Manor Schools Association. The movement soon spread to manor schools countrywide. In 1999, the Southeastern Estonian Manor Schools Association and the Lääne-Viru County Manor Schools Association were established. The Viljandi County Manors non-profit established in 1999 includes the manor schools in Viljandi County region as well as some private manors as members.

The Association of Manor Schools was founded in 2003; the non-profit currently has 43 members, representing 39 schools. Due to the efficiency of a cross-country organisation the regional groups stayed behind. The association has promoted common identity like school notebooks with the same design to the students of all manor schools, etc. The best known of

different activities is a game, "Forgotten Manors", held every summer since 2003, during which several dozen schools open their doors to the public for six days.

National programme for manor schools

Besides the manor schools them selves, credit for promoting this unique phenomenon should be given to the National Heritage Board and the Ministry of Culture. In 1999, they began preparing a funding plan for valorisation and restoration of manor schools. In 2001, the Ministry of Culture launched a national programme for preservation and developing the manor schools into a modern teaching and learning environment, spanning the period 2001-2011. It focused mainly on construction and restoration.

The budget for 2002–2011 was 3,120,638 Euros, and a total of 266 applications were funded during the programme period. The main activities supported were renovation and restoration, investigations, special heritage conservation conditions, design and expert analysis of projects, development activities, trainings and acquisitions of furnishings. Regular support was provided to the Association of Manor Schools and the game "Forgotten Manors", and history displays were commissioned from the Historical Archives of Estonia.

The programme proved so successful that a continuation programme also got the nod – "Manor Schools 2012-2016".

In total 49 schools i.e. the majority of manor schools received support from the national programme from 2002-2015. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Culture assistance could not prevent a number of them from closing for good.

The European Economic Area manor schools programme

The state's interest and attention and the visible, laudable results of the programme are responsible for the fact that for two consecutive financing periods (2004-2009 and 2009-2014) the EEA and Norwegian grants for cultural heritage have gone specifically to manor schools. First and foremost, the goal of the programme is to support the multi-functional use of historical manor buildings and to improve children's environment for learning and development.

Funding in the first period was especially generous. The assistance totalled 8.2 million euros. In 2008–2011 this assistance was used to fund restoration works in nine manor schools. Through the Ministry of Social Affairs programme for improving educational conditions for children with special needs, the EEA Grants and Norway Grants also channelled funding for the restoration of one more manor school.

The second EEA Grants programme started in 2013 and this time there was less money available – 4.5 million Euros. Of this, 3.1 million Euros was distributed for the restoration of four manors. There were so many applicants that 11 had to be declined.

Still in a way the second programme period was even more challenging as it did not only deal with school restoration and repair; but focused on the increasingly salient topic of ensuring sustainability. There's no point in fixing up an old mansion if the families with children are moving away from the area. Thus grants could also be sought from the EEA programme for "development activities". A total of 670,000 euros in grants was distributed to 14 school communities. The word "community" must be emphasized here as the projects did not focus only on schools but also on local inhabitants, teachers and parents.

In addition very popular training course for developing manor schools as community centres was carried out. There was much interest: 32 schools took part in four groups. As a continuation

training programme, four manor schools received in-depth treatment to help them put together a working business model to ensure sustainability. The four selected schools are a cross-section of schools' concerns: the first two, despite their good location, are contending with a shortage of students, while the other two were concerned over lack of integration with the local community.

A school is, above all, a school and to break the common misconceptions that only city schools provide a good education, a fairly thorough series of workshops for teachers was organized as a part of the programme. Both the manor schools' teachers themselves and the invited guests offered ways of better tying the manor environment to subjects. The workshops resulted in study materials that will help the teachers and hopefully persuade parents that manor schools can be providers of an exciting, high-quality educational experience. But this was not the only goal of study materials. The school buildings i.e. manors themselves serve as study books. Some schools are housed in buildings dating back to medieval times, while Baroque, Classicist and Historicist style buildings are widespread. The study materials were built up on the idea of spotting interesting details, stories and environment as a suitable material for learning exercises.

The programme has been an extraordinarily exciting learning experience also for the coordinators. Each meeting tried to focus on learning from one another and all the meetings, trainings and seminars were carried out in different schools. The broader aim was to motivate teachers, students and parents, manor schools to create a credible and praiseworthy counterweight to urbanization, which has become a veritably coercive process due to today's austerity policies.

Conclusion

Estonian manor schools are a unique phenomenon – a century-old example of how a type of cultural heritage lost its original function but was given a new chance to shine. They also bear living witness to hundreds of years of history, culture and architecture, the last hundred years in Estonian educational and regional policy, and society's values. Only Latvia and, to some extent, Hungary have a manor school tradition of similar extent.

After nationalisation the elegant mansions were taken into public use and during the century ca 300 schools have been working in the manors. Literally the upper class mansions were turned in to classrooms. Thus they are loaded with different layers of values, conflicting interpretations, colonial background, traditions and history. Nowadays the remaining 69 schools serve as creators of local identity to preserve and promote modern rural lifestyle and prevent massive, in Estonian case already critical urbanisation.

Providing homes for schools and regional educational developments not just the maintenance and care for protected monuments is ensured, but they serve also as positive examples of the goals and ideas of heritage protection and sustainable development of the environment.

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