

Housing in Social Practices of The Religious Communities: Experience of Migration and Interaction in the (Sub)Urban Environment

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Abstract

The concept of housing could be helpful to understand the interaction and, at the same time, a fusion of theological and social dimensions in the everyday religious practices. The idea of housing as embodiment of living space in the religious context could be extrapolated from the “house of God”, the house of prayer that represents the place of religious rituals, collective and individual religious experience. This space is *appropriated* (in term of Michel de Certeau) by the religious groups for the conversation with the God, as well as for the communication with the parishioners, for religious practices and for (re)socialization. These practices as *tactics* (de Certeau) constitute not only the sacred space of common religious experience, but also the social space of interaction, where social *diakonia*, understood as a faith-based social and mental support for vulnerable groups, appears as one of the main tools for building the dialogue with the marginalized groups.

The case study of the Latgale suburb (district) of Rīga (historical *Moskauer Vorstadt*) demonstrates the historical deeply rooted coexistence between different religious communities (Russian Orthodox, Old Believers, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Jews) that have common social experience and traumas. The multifaceted religious landscape of this suburb that includes not only sacred buildings but also relatively constant housing areas, still determines the special character of the local social milieu. However, the social, ethnic, and religious composition of the district's inhabitants has changed during the second part of the 20th century due to Sovietisation, the “local” suburb dwellers maintained the specific *genius loci* that determines more openness and empathy to the newcomer with different migration backgrounds. Examples of the Roman Catholic, Old Believers' and Armenian communities demonstrate the different levels of practicing “mental housing” comprised of religious ethos, social charity, and intercommunity dialogue.

Keywords: Rīga, Religious communities, Suburban environment, Newcomers, Social diakonia.

Introduction: social practices of religious communities

The urban space could be observed and described not only as a physical space constituted by architectural environment, but also as a social space that manifests emerged both through the everyday practices of city dwellers and through the representations of the strategies performed by the official institutions. Since the beginning of 1970s the urban sociology discourse exploited the praxeological approach to the interpretation of the city as a social phenomenon, emphasising social practices of everyday life as well as a semiotic manifestation of the “production of space”¹. Different religious communities present in an urban milieu that influence their closest environment create both the symbolic space of sacred architecture and residential buildings, as well as social networking within the community and between religious and secular communities. According to de Certeau, religious communities – notably, marginalized groups – used varied “tactics” to *appropriate* the urban area and adopted it to their religious and social purpose². A “house of God” transforms into a *locus* of “mental housing”, where the associates meet in a broad sense; and, at the same time it manifests as a “spiritual” and physical asylum for those in need.

In the post-secular era, the presence of religious communities in the public space and their participation in public life are often characterised not only by their religious practices (theological dimension), but also by their social service (social *diakonia* (from Greek term meaning ‘service’, among other things)), which is still one of the key religious phenomena expanding beyond the parish boundaries. The term *diakonia* was referenced in the New Testament (Luke 22.24–27; Mark 9.35, 10.45) and has already been employed in the Protestant tradition in the course of the last 200 years. The importance of the church’s social assistance was especially significant in the context of fundamental inequalities and social gaps impacted by the 19th century industrialization in Western Europe. Aside from being a key concept in Protestant theology, the similar idea historically was a integral part of *caritas* practice in Roman Catholic Church and charity in Orthodoxy.

The concept of social *diakonia* describes primarily the social action of a Christian church, the practices of the social and mental support for parishioners and for all socially vulnerable groups (people-in-need in a broad sense of the term). At the same time, it is also the expression of adherence to a certain Christian congregation, an aspect of one’s religious identity with the charity being traditionally emphasized as serving our neighbour, sharing the love of Christ. In the last decade, social *diakonia* has increasingly been regarded in an ecumenical context as a faith-based practice of caring for marginalized and suffering people, implemented not only by the professional diaconal workers and agencies but also by the “ordinary” volunteers from among the parishioners³. Moreover, from the perspective of increasing religious pluralism, as well as of the liberal idea of religious neutrality, the field of Christian social *diakonia* becomes closely related to the secular social work profession and academic discipline. Therefore, the conceptual shift in the comprehension of *diakonia* came into view moving from the “inner mission” idea, based on the Protestant Christian tradition, to the Christian social practice globally extended⁴. In the modern public discourse the notion of *diakonia* is often connected with the ecumenical solidarity as it is proclaimed by the World Council of Churches. Moreover, the “ecumenical” here does not only mean collaboration between churches, but also between churches and agencies, national and international. Christian

diakonia is aimed at the wide range of problems: starting with economic injustice and poverty and ending with migration, ethnic and religious conflicts, isolation and abuse against individuals and groups⁵. It should definitely be noted that the social practices of care are not the prerogative of Christian groups alone. The experience of every religious community presupposes the moral, social, and physical care for its members as a part of religious service.

Turning to the concept of housing in the context of Christian religious experience, at least two aspects of the term need to be highlighted. The housing could be understood as involvement in the church / parish life, as a possibility of finding refuge and safety in any church, chapel, or prayer house, and feeling at home there, both mentally and physically. At the same time, housing means providing asylum, as the practice of *caritas* (from Latin charity, or love), which is one of the fundamental Christian virtues: "So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). Shelters for children, homeless, and disabled people are still the most common institutional forms of housing practice in almost all religious communities. The concept of housing also includes a deeper philosophical dimension. In the context of religious migrations and refugee movements caused by various political and social factors, the refuge for the persecuted meant the opportunity to stay in a safe environment and to perform the religious practices. The history of Orthodox Old Believers on the territory of contemporary Latvia represents a case of forced religious migration and a long path toward cultural enrooting into the Latvian cultural landscape⁶.

Focusing on the housing in the practice of religious communities in contemporary Latvia, we need to keep in mind that the lasting Soviet occupation destroyed the forms of traditional institutional charity by placing the religious communities under the strong ideological control and by excluding their presence from the public sphere in all manifestations that could overlap with the official state programs. This applied both to the fields of education and housing, with the understanding that the development of an atheist-socialist society as the only legitimate option. Consequently, during the Soviet period religious communities practised their charity services only in an illegal, underground order, providing refuge in secret, private way to avoid the control from official state institutions. Nevertheless, even at that time there existed a functioning shelter for Orthodox Old Believer seniors (in the form of a "communal flat" in the house next to the Grebenščikov prayer house in the Latgale (at that time Moscow) district of Riga). Similarly, there were shelters established by Roman Catholic clergy for seminarians who had nowhere to stay. Since the restoration of Latvian independence (1990), the religious community gradually renewed the traditional forms of charity based on their experience during the interwar period thanks to the restitution of the property expropriated during the Soviet period. The legislation of the Republic of Latvia also allows for the establishment of new religious organisations, including parishes of Christian denominations historically not represented in Latvia. Such is the case of the Armenian Apostolic Church that was present in Latvia since 1993 and during the last 30 years has institutionally developed into a diocesan-level structure in the Baltic States.

Further, we will offer a glimpse into cultural and social experience of three Christian religious communities that are present in the *Moskauer Vorstadt*, but have different historical background and roots in the urban environment of Rīga. The first group is the Orthodox Old Believers community that has been part of the district that was involved in the industrialisation process and in the formation of urban environment in this area. At



the same time it is the extremely close-knit community aimed to preserve their traditions and its circle of adherents remains strictly defined. Furthermore, we will also look at the *caritas* practices represented by Roman Catholic community that combine social charity in the contemporary situation of a socially uncertain milieu of this neighbourhood with its historical experience of religious (spiritual) and social support for parishioners and seminarians provided in the context of “silent resistance” during the Soviet period. Finally, the case of “newcomers” in this district will be singled out through a brief insight into the activities of the Armenian parish. Throughout our study, we will keep our focus on the understanding of housing as not just a physical but also mental retreat, as a result of *appropriation tactics* constituting specific *trajectories* of social interaction within one community or between different groups.

Historical background: *genius loci* of *Moskauer Vorstadt*

The Latgale district, one of the six administrative districts in Riga, is located on the right bank of the river Daugava to the south of the medieval centre of Riga (the Old Town of Riga)⁷. Despite its official administrative status as the city district, colloquially, as well as in media publications and tourist guides, it is called “the suburb”, and in Latvian the term “Forštate” is also used (*die Vorstadt* in German). This term clearly marks the “otherness” of this colourful part of the city in the mental map of Riga’s inhabitants. Historically the territory of the suburb was a settlement of boatmen, rafters, and traders located near the medieval trade artery of Daugava, and later, along the road connecting Riga and Moscow, from which the name the “Moskauer Vorstadt” (in Latvian *Maskavas Forštate*) was coined. Today the district comprises nine neighbourhoods within the contemporary administrative borders of Latgale suburb. Its history dates back to the 14th century, when in 1348 it was first mentioned in historical records under the name Lastādija (in German: *Lastadie*, from *die Last*: weight, load)

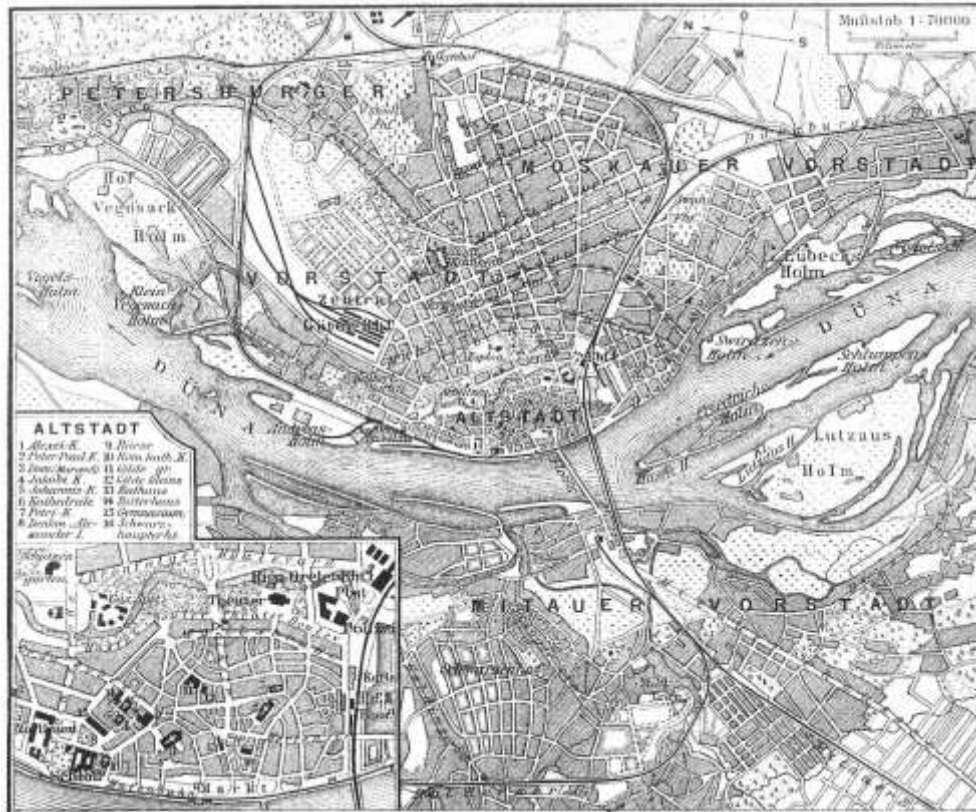


Figure 1 - Historical map of Rīga, 1900 (Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Altstadt_Riga OR: <http://www.zeno.org/Meyers-1905/1/160932a>).



Figure 2 - Historical Moscow suburb on the contemporary city plan (Available at: <http://wikimapia.org/7980178/de/Moskauer-Vorstadt>).

Over the centuries, this area developed as a multi-ethnic and poly-religious space, where traces of at least two large ethnoreligious groups are still present: the Russian Orthodox Old Believers and the Jewish community, as well as three Christian communities: Roman Catholics, Evangelical Lutherans, and the Russian Orthodox.

In the course of the 19th century the suburb of “rafters and traders” gradually transformed into industrial district (the Kuznetsov Porcelain and Faience Factory, founded in 1841, is worth mentioning; the factory still produced different brands until 2010, and originally brought hundreds of Russians, mostly Orthodox workers to Riga⁸). The architectural image of the district is marked by the sacred buildings of religious communities mentioned above, and it is still well-represented by the golden cupola of the bell tower of the Grebenščikov Old Believers parish prayer house, the green cupola of the Orthodox All Saints Church or two spires of the neo-gothic Saint Francis Roman Catholic Church



Figure 3 - Panoramic view of the *Moskauer Vorstadt*, 2019 (Photo by J. Kalniņš. Available at: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/dzive--stils/pilsetvide/kam-brauks-pari-dzelzcels-rail-baltica-ietekme-uz-maskavas-forstati.a327414/>).

Paradoxically, nearly all of the Christian churches in the suburb did not become the victims of the Soviet atheistic campaign during the 1950-1960s, and were never closed. The fate of the Jewish community and of its heritage was far more tragic. On the 4th of July 1941, during the Nazi occupation (1941–1944), both synagogues in the suburb, the Choral synagogue (*Di greijse hor šul*, placed on the crossing of present Dzirnāvu and Emīlijas Benjamiņas (former Gogoļa) Street) and the Old New synagogue (Latgales (former Maskavas) Street 57⁹), were brutally burned down. Nowadays the memorials near the former location of the Choral synagogue and of the Old Jewish cemetery are the only reminders of the vibrant religious life of the Jewish residents. The cemetery was transformed to the public park named Communist Brigades Park in 1960, but the place of the destroyed synagogue was obliterated with the new street layout during the Soviet period. The traumatic memory of the Nazi-organized Jewish ghetto situated in *Moskauer Vorstadt*, and of the Holocaust in Latvia was maintained in collective memory of the local

suburb dwellers unofficially until the very late Soviet period (end of the 1980s), and was able to be expressed in a public space through joint remembrance and mourning only after the restoration of Latvia's independence



Figure 4 - The memorial event on the Holocaust Memorial of the Rīga Choral synagogue, 2021. (Photo by Aija Kinca. Available at: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/ebreju-tautas-genocida-upuru-pieminai--80-gadadiena.a411480/>).

Even the standardized Soviet-era architecture could not remove the traces of historical specificity in this district. Wooden family and apartment houses for low-income dwellers, as well as stone apartment houses with modest art nouveau features still characterize the suburban area between the historical *Vorstadt* and Soviet *microrayon* (district, or neighborhood) of Ķengarags that expanded the suburb in the 1950s.

Housing in the practices of Orthodox Old Believers: the Grebenščikov community as a social-religious *cluster*

The first groups of Old Believers appeared on the contemporary territory of Latvia in the 1660s immediately after the schism of the Russian Orthodox Church. The opponents of the liturgical reform promoted by Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich and patriarch Nikon were persecuted at home as disloyal citizens and consequently sought refuge abroad. The first settlements were established in the Eastern part of Latvia (Latgale) which was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the time. The local authorities were tolerant towards the immigrants there seeing them as good labour force in the war-torn and epidemic-ravaged area. Riga was an attractive place for the Old Believers because of opportunities to find employment in the constantly growing city, where it was also easier

“to get lost” and to obtain a new legal identity. Moreover, there was already a Russian community in Riga that practiced pre-reform Orthodoxy, so there were social preconditions for incorporating and expanding the religious community of their own.

Since Riga’s annexation by the Russian Empire in 1710, the legal status of Old Believers became problematic, but until the 1830s, the period of increasing persecution, their presence in the city was quite visible. Historically there were three Old Believers’ parishes in Riga, the largest community of priestless Old Believers-Feodosians (followers of a religious leader Feodosij Vasiljev, 1661(?) – 1711) was established in the Moscow suburb around 1760; subsequently its wooden prayer house was replaced by stone building, and since 1812 the hospital for old and disabled parishioners was also located there. In the 1820s the community also owned schools for boys and for girls. After the temporary expansion of the Tsarist repressive policies against the Old Believers in 1830s – 1850s, they received permission to organize an orphanage and a school affiliated with the hospital (hospice) in 1873. In spite of restrictions, they practiced all facets of social charity, including housing in the form of orphanage and shelter. A complex of buildings, used precisely for this purpose, appeared in the area surrounding the Grebenščikov prayer house.



Figure 5 - Grebenščikov prayer-house and almshouse, late 19th century. Grebenščikov parish archive.

In the second half of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century the Old Believer community in Rīga gradually transformed into the less isolated Pomorian denomination of the priestless Old Believers. After the decree of Nicholas II “On strengthening the foundations of religious tolerance” (17 April 1905) when the Old Believers in Russian Empire received the rights to practise their religious observance in public, they were allowed to build churches and bell towers. So also the Grebenščikov parish’s building was supplied with a bell tower at the time (1906, architect Alexander Schmeling)¹⁰.

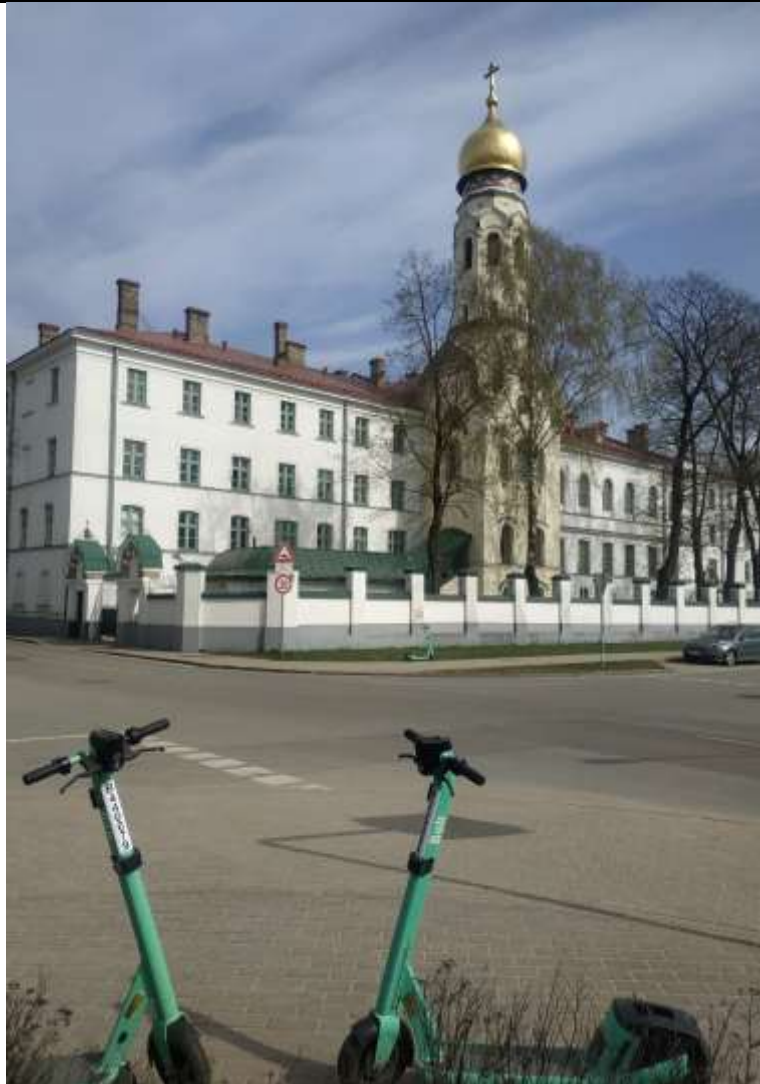


Figure 6 - Grebenščikov prayer-house with the bell tower, 2024 (Photo by Nadežda Pazuhina).

During the interwar period, after the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia, the quite large – around 7000 believers – Old Believer Grebenščikov parish was an important cultural and social centre for Russian inhabitants of this district. They did not only open the religious Sunday school for children and adult Old Believers, but also a kindergarten (house for this purpose was built in 1937, by the architect Vladimirs Šervinskis (1894 – 1975)) and – in cooperation with the Riga municipality – maintained the orphanage and hospice for the senior and disabled persons regardless of their religious affiliation.



Figure 7 - Latgales (Maskavas) street, 1939. On the left is the building of Grebenščikov parish school remaining today. (Available at: <https://zudusilatvija.lv/objects/object/22841/>).

The Soviet occupation of 1940 put an end to these activities, all property of the parish was nationalised, and community continued its life under these conditions even after World War II. In spite of regular atheistic campaigns held during the 1960s the divine services were held in the church every morning and evening¹¹. However, the flats of parish clergy were officially taken away, and active parishioners tried to settle in “communal flats” in the former shelter house to maintain the care and support for the elder parishioners. Of course, it was a form of unofficial charity that could only be provided thanks to the “silent resistance” practiced during Soviet era.

The late 1980s saw the revival of interest in religion and religious traditions, perceived as the “lost identity” which was for a long time stolen by the Soviet ideology. With the relative liberalisation after the “perestroika,” the search for religious awareness was a kind of alternative to the official worldview based on secular consciousness. The Old Believer community opened its doors not only to the descendants from the Old Believer families returned to the religious tradition of their ancestors but also welcomed the newcomers who sought a chance for anchoring in a deep tradition. In this sense, the Grebenščikov parish shared housing for religious seekers both as a physical space of communication and as a metaphorical meeting place for religious experience. Considering this, we can observe how the process of gathering the community members, reconstruction and revitalisation of architectural and social environment of the parish during the 1990s and 2000s provided and stimulated the social cohesion of Old Believers in Rīga¹².



Figure 8 - Procession of the Cross in Grebenščikov parish, 2010. (Photo by Vladimirs Nikonovs).

Recovering the property that was lost in the past allowed the Grebenščikov parish to maintain the status of most significant priestless Old Believer community of the Pomorian denomination outside of Russia (c. 4500 parishioners). Moreover, the education and publishing activities in the Grebenščikov parish traditionally were important for the whole Old Believers community in Latvia. For this reason, the Grebenščikov parish historically had quite a high standing among the Latvian Old Believers, as well as abroad. The architectural complex of the Grebenščikov parish comprises of the prayer house with the library, the icon painting and restoration workshop, the community museum, and buildings of shelters, school, printing house, all designated as an architectural monument of national importance (since 1998, enlisted No 6629)¹³. Hence, the value of the tangible heritage of the Old Believers has achieved its institutional recognition, and is also acknowledged by the wider society.

Coexistence on the same street: *Katoļu iela* (Catholic Street)

Despite the renom   of the “Russian” district colloquially mentioned both in oral narratives and media publications regarding the *Moskauer Vorstadt* historically and nowadays, in fact, this is the place of encounters for different religious and ethnic communities, sometimes in a very narrow space. The typical example is the Catholic Street (*Katoļu iela*, 1845-1866 named *Grosse Todtenstrasse* obviously due to surrounding cemeteries where the poor residents of Riga were buried in 1773–1872), a place where the Roman Catholic church of St. Francis (1890) and the Catholic Seminary (established in 1920, on this address, *Katoļu 16*, since 1946), the Orthodox All Saints church (1882) and

Orthodox seminary (established in 1851, at this address, Katoļu 10, since 1993), and the Bethlehem House of Charity¹⁴ (founded in 2011, Katoļu 14) all are present. Nearby, at Ludzas Street 6/8, the Mother Teresa Missionary House of Charity is located, founded in the mid-1990s.



Figure 9 - The Mother Teresa House of Charity, view from Ludzas street, 2024. (Photo by Nadežda Pazuhina).

The Roman Catholic community is the second largest religious community in Latvia after the Lutheran community (268 parishes in 2021, compared with 287 Lutheran, 133 Orthodox, 72 Old Believer parishes registered in the same year¹⁵). Similarly to the majority of Old Believers that are coming from Latgale, so also the Roman Catholicism after the Reformation is the dominant congregation in Latgale in contrast to Kurzeme (western part of Latvia) and Vidzeme (northern part of Latvia), where the majority of believers are Lutherans.

The Roman Catholic parish of St. Francis was established in 1911, previously being affiliated with the Mater Dolorosa parish in the Old Town. At the end of the 1880s the small oratory near the Roman Catholic cemetery was replaced by the church designed by the Belarus-born Latvian architect Flaryjan Vyhanouski (in Latvian: Floriāns fon Viganovskis, 1854 – 1914 (?)). The construction started in 1889 and already in 1892 the church was consecrated. The church was built in a Neo-Gothic style with a French Romanesque building plan, two spired bell towers that not only dominate the buildings of the surrounding area, but also marking the silhouette/skyline of the district. The Roman Catholic cemetery was closed in 1885, and its territory was merged with other former

cemeteries in this area, where later the chief garden architect and city designer Georg Kuphaldt (in Latvian: Georgs Kūfalts, 1853 – 1938) created the Park of Peace (*Miera dārzs*). After World War II, the Roman Catholic Seminary moved here to find an inconspicuous location on the city outskirts. Seminarians and professors lived in a small former parish house, but it was an exceptionally appropriate solution during the oppressive times period of state atheism. In the 1980s it became the first example of the expanding Seminary building complex in the Soviet Union. Of course, it was only possible due to creative circumvention of the repressive laws directed against the practice of religion. The permission was granted to reconstruct the existing parish building but instead, two new blocks were built (architect Atis Bīviņš (born 1943)). The first block was completed in 1983 (613 sq. m. wide), the second building was finally completed and put into use in 1992 (3040 sq. m.). The seminarians also participated in the building's construction as an auxiliary force. On September 8, 1993 Pope John Paul II came to see the Seminary during his visit to Latvia. During this period, the Roman Catholic Seminary in Riga provided housing not only to the Latvian seminarians but also to the students from other republics of the USSR, as the only educational institution for the Roman Catholic priests in the Soviet Union. The new seminary buildings housed classrooms, apartments for seminarians, library, chapel, study rooms and apartments for the rector and inspector, utility rooms, and cellars. This infrastructure is still used by seminarians today.



Figure 10 - St. Francis church and Catholic Seminary building in Rīga, view from the Park of Peace (*Miera dārzs*), 2020 (Photo by Valdemārs Helmanis).

The Bethlehem House of Charity is a Christian rehabilitation centre and its aim is to help people with addictions who want to change their lives, not only in their outward circumstances but also restoring their personal dignity by realising their value, developing healthy relationships, working and serving others.



[Figure 11. The Bethlehem House of Charity in Rīga, view from Katoļu street, 2024. (Photo by Nadežda Pazuhina)]

The official name of this organization is the Rehabilitation Centre Nova Vita, which has also the second branch “Pēternieki” in Olaine, a small town 20 km from Riga.¹⁶ Its leader and manager is former businesswoman Dana Valija Anskaitė who was running this rehabilitation centre for 11 years. In 2012 she received a Bachelor of Humanities in Religion from the Riga branch of the Pontifical Lateran University (*RARZI – Rīgas Augstākais reliģijas zinātņu institūts*). During her career she has established a rehabilitation centre without any financial support from the state or the municipality. The funds for the Bethlehem House are provided by donations and various social projects. The owner of the building is the Roman Catholic Church, while the staff are volunteers. The rehabilitation center includes also those who have previously completed a rehabilitation program themselves, and who provide support for the current participants with their experience and knowledge. The House employs a psychologist and psychotherapist, an art therapist, addiction counsellors, a social worker and a physical education teacher. It is also a place of refuge for the neighbourhood children who leave home due to their parents’ alcoholism or neglect. The young people live there like a big family, which likewise has many various problems that faith in God should help to overcome.¹⁷ The Bethlehem House residents receive the specialist counselling, spiritual support and everything they need for everyday life. On average, 40 people a year receive help at the rehabilitation centre. On average, about 15 people stay in the two branches of the rehabilitation centre at the same time. In total, about 650 people have been helped in the 11 years of charitable work.¹⁸



Figure 12. The group talk in the Bethlehem House, Rīga, 2012. (Available at: <http://www.novavita.lv/betlemes-zelsirdibas-maja/#jp-carousel-7181>).

The Bethlehem House welcomes people of all denominations, including those who are religiously indifferent, or are just seeking to find their way to God. Moreover, the residents can freely choose a Christian denomination that they would like to join, and may participate in either Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Orthodox services. Among the participants of the rehabilitation course there are also representatives of different ethnic and religious groups.

Newcomers in the *Vorstadt*: the Armenian community

Despite the fact that the quarters of the *Vorstadt* appear to be a fully complete ensemble that does not require any new structures in it, especially sacred buildings, in the late 1990s a new Christian congregation appeared in the area: the parish of the Armenian Apostolic Church.. However, the parish building is located on the outskirts of the historical quarters, near the belt of contemporary functional array of supermarkets, showrooms, offices and conference halls designed in the late 1990s and 2000s. The silhouette of Armenian church on the Kojusalas Street aptly marks the boundary between the “contemporary” urban street alignment and the “historic” street network that creates the different scale and proportions for the urban living space.



Figure 13 - Armenian Church in Rīga, 2023 (Photo by Nadežda Pazuhina).

The Armenian church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator was built with the help of donations in 1998-2009 (architect Akop Babakhanian), and consecrated on June 30, 2011. The church building can accommodate around hundred parishioners. Services are held every Sunday, as well as on religious holidays, the main ones being Christmas and Easter. The parish runs a Sunday school where the students do not only learn about the foundations of faith, but also the Armenian language, the history and culture of Armenia.

The Armenian community in Riga and the city surroundings is not large, approximately 2014 people (2023), this ethnic group grew considerably during the Soviet period, especially in 1959 – 1989 (from 1060 to 3069 people)¹⁹. After the restoration of independence of Latvia, Latvian Armenians tried to redefine their collective identity as a minority community. Consequently, establishing their own parish in 1993 was meant to be a basis not only for religious but also for social cohesion of this group.



Figure 14 - Representatives of Armenian St. Gregory the Illuminator parish, in the centre of the group is the priest Hosrov Stepanian, 2024. (Photo by Babken Stepanian).

Recently, in 2020, the Armenian Apostolic Church Diocese in the Baltic States was established. The Diocese includes Armenian parishes in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. St. Gregory the Illuminator Church in Riga became the diocesan cathedral. The bishop of Armenian Church in the Baltic States, Vardan Navasardian, advocates dialog with all Christian congregations. As an example of this, in 2022, when the parish received the icon of St. Barbara from an unknown Armenian benefactor, celebrating the memory of the martyr St. Barbara on 4 October the Armenian Church in Riga hosted an ecumenical service, a concert, and a reception, giving the opportunity to all Christians to venerate the icon²⁰.

The Armenian community also demonstrates its social solidarity with the neighbourhood's residents, participating in environmental improvement of the surrounding area. As a result, in 2016 within walking distance from the church, on Balvu Street 17, the Yerevan Garden was opened.



Figure 15 - Yerevan Garden. Tourist map, 2021. (Available at: <https://www.apeirons.lv/maskavas-forsstate-maskavas-erevanas-un-kojusalas-darzs/>)

The opening ceremony was attended by the mayors of Riga and Yerevan, emphasizing the initiative and engagement of the local Armenian community. The Yerevan Garden covers an area of 3759 square metres including children's playground, covered with a sun-shaped pavement, symbolising the warmth of the Armenian people and their respect for family values.



Figure 16 - Yerevan Garden, 2016. (Available at: https://cdntest.db.lv/lvold/1200/2019/article/0046/459578/2070743_ORIGINAL_1486459659.jpg).

The design is based on the silhouette of Yerevan city map while the paths and other landscaping elements are based on Armenian national symbols. The border of the landscape here is a flowing line reminiscent of the rivers of Armenia. The technical design of the area was financed by Armenian contractors and the project was funded by the Riga City Council. The architects of the project are Olga Krilova and Jevgēnija Kostina, the consultant is landscape architect Olga Gerasimova.²¹ Landscaping the garden in a derelict area, damaged by enforced planning during the Sovietisation, is an excellent example of social coexistence here which addresses different sociocultural experiences in the shared living space of the suburb.

Conclusions

Despite the controversial reputation of the Latgale suburb as an area settled by criminals and place for socially vulnerable inhabitants, the environmental revitalisation projects of the last decade have shown great cultural and social potential of this district, as well as high tourism potential thanks to its architectural heritage. On the one hand, in the *Moskauer Vorstadt* the historical buildings (wooden architecture, rather modest Art Nouveau, “Soviet brutalism” or “socialist functionalism” architecture) and street layout is preserved, on the other hand, the social, ethnic, and religious composition of its inhabitants has changed during the last 70 years. Nevertheless, the “historical core” of local residents were capable to follow the area specific *genius loci* and to engage the newcomers in the everyday practices. Social, religious, and linguistic diversity in this case stimulates more dynamic (in some cases also more emphatic) attitude towards the “hosts” and “housing seekers”.

To summarise, we can observe that the social diakonia and charity activities of all three above mentioned religious communities demonstrate the importance of both theological (religious, spiritual dimension) and social (assistance and support) levels of activity. Therefore, the common understanding the practice of housing in different congregations are expressed here as hosting believers or newcomers in the “house of God”, holding divine services, including ecumenical events (with exception of Old Believers), spiritual conversation, and religious education.

After analysing the charitable practices we can conclude that more closed ethnoreligious communities like the Russian Old Believers and the Armenians are nevertheless willing to participate in the social charity projects, involving their own parishioners as well as representatives from various social groups, especially persons-in-need living in the neighbourhood. In this way, they demonstrate social solidarity with the district residents. At the same time both communities are more focused on the internal ecclesiastical mission and, first of all, take care of their own congregants (including social care, for example, hosting the old persons in the shelters affiliated to parish, as in the case of the Grebenščikov community). Additionally, the character of spiritual support and religious education is rooted in the congregation’s particular theological tradition, language (Church Slavonic and Armenian respectively), as well as on their own understanding their distinct cultural identity. We could introduce the concept of “spiritual” or “mental” housing, understood as a fusion of congregation-specific religious practices and charity. The parish functions in this case as the “place” (in term of Michel de Certeau) where the inclusive environment takes shape through socialization “tactics”. These ethnoreligious



communities operate within their defined cultural borders, but at the same time they continue to interact with another groups of society, even with reference to their own “otherness”. The historically-rooted diversity normalizes parity-based relationships and results as social integrity saving cultural (and linguistic) inhomogeneity.

If we compare this phenomenon with the caritas practices of Roman Catholic community in the same district, we must note a more ecumenical approach to the understanding of social diakonia, which seeks to resolve deep social problems affecting vulnerable social groups regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, or religious identity. The theological component of caritas without any doubt is also present, yet it is not the main purpose of charity. In this sense, the freedom to choose the way to the God without expectation to remain in a Roman Catholic parish, as it is in case of Bethlehem House, seems to be the appropriate way to provide the value of free will that is both Christian and democratic freedom.

Continuing to research the role of religious communities in social inclusion, pointing out the context of unsecure social milieu of the suburb, we must take into account the historical experience of self-organization practice and charity principles within the different congregations. Not all religious communities seek to be open for the newcomers who are not interested in following established religious traditions, yet almost all religious groups can engage in common social projects based on the concept of social diakonia.

As a consequence, the housing, comprised both as mental and physical asylum, could be expanded to the level of social urban space of a neighbourhood, directed at living a secure life founded upon the interaction among communities and more active social engagement of parishes, religious organizations, and donors who would support informal communication and constructive interaction between the city residents, both the “locals” and the “newcomers”. The experience of religious communities should be respected as accumulation of practical tools and forms, as well as for its potential, based on religious ethos, to motivate and mentally support the people involved.

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¹ The idea of the social production of space appeared in the book "La production de l'espace" published by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in 1974. In the same year Michel de Certeau presented his book "L'invention du quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de faire", opening the discussion about the tension between "producers" and "consumers", represented institutions of power and ordinary people.

² Detailed explanation of the "ways of operating" and tactics see in: de CERTEAU, Michel – *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1988, 23 – 30. ISBN 0520236998.

³ Reflections on the social perspectives of social diakonia are presented in a book published by researchers of Diakonhjemmet University College in Oslo, which problematises the paradigm shift in the understanding of diakonia: DIETRICH, Stephanie, et al., editors. *Diakonia as Christian Social Practice: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: 1517 Media, Fortress Press, 2014. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcsdb>. (Accessed 26/11/2023)

⁴ The critical analysis regarding conceptualisation of ecumenical diakonia and its moving beyond the historic focus on assistance and care is presented in the Philippe Öhlmann's discussion provoking article: ÖHLMANN, Philipp. "Diaconia and Development: The Study of Religious Social Practice as Lead Discipline in the Religion and Development Debate" *Religions* 14, no. 8: 1032, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081032>

⁵ Diakonia and ecumenical solidarity. Available at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/diakonia-and-ecumenical-solidarity> (Accessed 30/03/2024)

⁶ More about the contextualisation of the historical experience of religious communities regarding migrations processes: KIOPE, Māra. "Reliģijvēsturiskās pieredzes kontekstualizācija migrācijas procesu izpētē Latvijā. Cilvēks un cilvēksituācija sabiedrībā un kultūrā. Latvijas Universitātes 81. starptautiskās zinātniskās konferences rakstu krājums. Rīga: LU FSI, 2023: 55 – 66. ISBN 9789934506666. Available at: https://dspace.lu.lv/dspace/bitstream/handle/7/65087/2023_cilveks_cilveksituacija_2.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (Accessed 30/03/2024)

⁷ Rīga City Council. About Rīga. (20/05/2020) Available at: <https://www.riga.lv/en/about-riga> (Accessed 30/03/2024)

⁸ More about the history of the "Kuznetsov porcelain" produced by 13 factories in different regions of the Russian Empire: Celebrate Porcelain with Kuznetsov: exhibition 10.02.2023.-06.08.2023.: catalogue / structure, texts, scientific editor, curator Marta Šuste editing: Annija Grīse, Jevgēnija Hamudajeva. Rīga: Zuzeum Publishing, 2023. ISBN 9789934901430

⁹ When this article was being edited, on February 21, 2024, the Rīga City Council resolved to change the names of a number of streets in the district. It was a very significant process of semiotically important rejection of "Soviet and imperial legacy" in the urban environment impacted by the Russia's invasion in the Ukraine in February 2022. (24/022022). For the official information, see: Rīgā pārdēvēs Maskavas, Lomonosova, Puškina, Gogoļa, Ļermontova un Turgeņeva ielas.

Available at: <https://www.riga.lv/lv/jaunums/riga-pardeves-maskavas-lomonosova-puskina-gogola-lermontova-un-turgeneva-ielas> (Accessed 30/03/2024)

¹⁰ For a detailed description of the Grebenščikov parish complex, see the book: The КЛЕШНИНА, Людмила – Сакральный комплекс Рижской Гребенщиковской старообрядческой общины: культурный феномен. Рига: Рижская Гребенщиковская старообрядческая община, 2022. ISBN 978-9934-611-06-3

¹¹ More about the history of Old Believers in Latvia see: PODMAZOVŠ, Arnolds – Vecticība Latvijā. Rīga: Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts, 2001. ISBN 9789984624167.

¹² The comparative analysis on the activities of the Old Believers in Rīga during the interwar period and the first decade of 21st century see: PAZUHINA, Nadežda – Tradition and reconstruction of tradition: the experience of Russian Old Believers in Latvia. In: *The ritual year 8. Migrations*. Edited by Dobrinka Parusheva and Lina Gergova. Sofia: Paradigma, 2014, 264 – 273. ISSN 2228-1347.

¹³ 6629 - Grebenščikova vecticībnieku kopienas lūgšanu nama ar klosteri apbūve. Available at: <https://mantojums.lv/cultural-objects/6629> (Accessed 30/03/2024)

¹⁴ Bethlehem House of Charity. Available at: <http://www.novavita.lv/en/betlemes-zelsirdibas-maja/> (Accessed 30/03/2024)

¹⁵ Number of religious congregations registered in the country by denomination at the end of the year - Denominations and Time period. Available at:

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¹⁶ Bethlehem house of charity. Available at: <http://www.novavita.lv/en/betlemes-zelsirdibas-maja/> (Accessed 30/03/2024)

¹⁷ Dana Anskaitē: Dievs mīl taisnīgi - to saprast jāiemācās. (26/03/2016) Available at: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/dzive--stils/cilvekstasti/dana-anskaite-dievs-mil-taisnigi-to-saprast-jaiemacas.a175267/> (Accessed 30/03/2024)

¹⁸ Atbalsti „Betlēmes žēlsirdības māju“, lai palīdzētu atkarības nonākušajiem (18/10/2022) Available at: <https://katolis.lv/2022/10/atbalsti-rehabilitācijas-centru-betlemes-zelsirdibas-maja-lai-palīdzētu-atkarības-nonakusajiem/> (Accessed 30/03/2024)

¹⁹ Population by ethnicity at the beginning of year 1935 – 2023 Available at: https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRE/IRE010/table/tableViewLayout1/ (Accessed 30/03/2024)

²⁰ Uz ekumenisku dievkalpojumu aicina Rīgas armēņu apustuliskā draudze (3/10/2022) <https://katolis.lv/2022/10/uz-ekumenisku-dievkalpojumu-aicina-rigas-armenu-apustuliska-draudze/> (Accessed 3/04/2024)

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