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VANISHING BEAUTY

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Abstract. The author examines the architectural context as a formative factor in the cultural environment. This article focuses on the architectural heritage of the Pomorian Old Believers (bespopovtsy) of Latvia. This topic has not yet received adequate coverage in the scholarly literature. The Old Believers do not celebrate liturgy, so the Bespopovtsy prayer houses are typologically chapels; they have an iconostasis but no altar. In this article, the prayer houses are conventionally referred to as churches, as they are monumental buildings, and the Pomorian Old Believers themselves often refer to their prayer houses as such.

Key words: Pomorian Old Believer, heritage, church, architectural context, iconographic traditions.

The architectural context is a formative factor in the cultural environment. When architectural form is damaged, the cultural space degrades. Today, the danger comes from the bearers of culture themselves. We are unaware of the values we possess, and we don't know what to preserve and how to preserve it, so the study of regional cultural expressions has become a topical issue. Old Believer writing and singing traditions have been studied since the late 19th century. Thanks to the efforts of I. N. Zavoloko and the Riga Circle of Antiquarians in the 20th century, a lot was done to identify the cultural treasures of the Old Believers – manuscripts, spiritual poems, iconographic traditions, wood carvings, handicrafts, and folk embroidery. The attention of modern researchers is drawn to cemeteries and burial rites, oral folklore.

The interesting architectural heritage of the Old Believers in Latvia has yet to receive due recognition. Old Believer cultural monuments have not been scientifically described. The Daugavpils region was somewhat "lucky" – the first inventory of this region's sacred cultural monuments was completed in a book by Ruta Kaminska and Anita Bistere, published in 2006. This book, for the first time, offers a comprehensive overview of the region's sacred architecture, seamlessly integrating the Old Believer heritage. The authors undertook a significant effort to identify the sites, but that was all they did; the book offers no analysis of architectural features. Brochures about the churches, published by communities, provide details of parish life, but they do not address the technical or architectural features of the buildings.

The secularization of society continues, and new churches are a reflection of these processes. Several new religious buildings have been constructed in Latgale, including the Old Believer Church in Voitishki, Skrudaliena parish, built on the site of a church destroyed by fire.

Unfortunately, both the gate and the building bear little resemblance to the former church or other old chapels. Very close to Voitishki stands the chapel in Vilkeli, abandoned by its parishioners. The laconicism of forms, good proportions of volume, and a naive yet lively interpretation of canonical details combine to form a holistic image that excites the soul. The prayer house fits perfectly into the peaceful landscape. It is hard to leave this quiet place, it feels as though prayers are still silently echoing here. However, the discreet beauty of the wooden church has gone unnoticed; in Voitishki, sand-lime brick has been preferred. Another forgotten gem of folk art hides behind the crowns of old trees in Bondarishki. Why haven't these churches served as models for modern builders? The question remains unanswered. Another question we often hear is: "What is the beauty of old prayer houses?" Even the Old Believers themselves find it difficult to answer. To find the answer, we must understand the architectural heritage, study its characteristics, and to do this, we must first preserve authentic

examples of architecture that have not yet been destroyed or rebuilt. Only two such examples remain in the Daugavpils district: in Bondarishki and in Vilkeli.



Figure 1. Prayer house in Vilkeli, 1925.

In July 2008, the first expedition to the churches of the Daugavpils region was undertaken as part of a research project by the University of Latvia. Over the course of two days, only a brief examination of each site was possible, so this article does not attempt an in-depth study. The trip left a lasting impression: distinctive architecture with distinct regional characteristics unfolded before us. Purity of form, deliberate austerity and asceticism of expression, spontaneity and naivety in detail – these are the main hallmarks of the distinctive lapidary style inherent in all the old houses of worship. Within the boundaries of the Daugavpils region, there are 20 houses of worship, including seven stone churches and 13 wooden ones. Although most of them were built virtually simultaneously (in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries), these two heritage groups should be considered separately.

Stone prayer houses are concentrated primarily in the city, they are recognizable and well-known, have monument status, and are in good condition. They were built by professional architects or engineers, so project documentation for the objects is readily available, facilitating the work of researchers. As a phenomenon of urban culture, the appearance of old stone churches inevitably reflects the style and "architectural fashion" of their time. Tradition is creatively interpreted and embodied in them by professional architects in a contemporary interpretation. However, the names of the architects who designed the most beautiful city churches are still unknown.

It should be noted that, under the difficult construction circumstances of 1907-1928, the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary of the Novostroyenskaya community was built without any deviations from the project [1]. Therefore, the architect's majestic vision, driven by the desire to embody in stone the creative potential of the Old Believers, which had been forcibly banned until the early 20th century, was fully realized. The church's volumetric composition was conceived as strictly canoni-

cal. The cubic main volume, covered by a hipped roof and crowned by a large head with a cross, is clearly defined. The refectory section of the church is lowered to visually emphasize the verticality of the bell tower, which is designed as a rectangular tower "growing" from the roof of the two-story western extension. The laconic form of the bell tower, influenced by regional traditions, was brought from the wooden architecture of the Old Believers of the Daugavpils region. This solution is often found in rural prayer houses. The church facades are designed in the Russian style with elements of Art Nouveau. Influence of Art Nouveau style is clearly seen in the form of three tall portals (h = 16 m) adorning the western, northern and southern facades. A small head and a gently sloping tent are erected above the bell tower. Old photographs show that the original shape of the heads was very graceful and well-proportioned. The drum of the large head opened onto the interior of the church, illuminating it through six windows [1]. The roof and heads of the church burned during the war. We now see the top, restored under the difficult conditions of the Soviet era. Since then, light has not penetrated the interior, and the proportions of the heads are heavy, far from perfect. Unfortunately, the image of a church dedicated to the Mother of God with such heads has partially lost its former soaring skyward and graceful proportions.



Figure 2. The newly built prayer house in Dvinsk, built according to a 1908 project, architect Alexander Shpakovsky (?).



Figure 3. The newly built prayer house in Dvinsk (Daugavpils), modern appearance.

The beautiful Gaikovsky Annunciation Church in Dvinsk was built over a long period of time, in several stages [2]. In 1886, the solid and elegant one-story stone building with a gable roof, a narthex, and a square hall was consecrated. The eastern and western portions of the building were defined by avant-corps with pediments on the southern and northern facades. The walls were crowned with an arched frieze in the Romanesque style. The building bore no signs of a religious sanctuary. This part of the chapel has survived without modification to this day. Twenty years later, in 1906, after the proclamation of the Decree "On Strengthening the Principles of Religious Tolerance," a temporary

wooden bell tower with five bells was added to the church, and a small head was installed on the roof. By Easter 1907, a new brick bell tower was erected – two octagonal bells on a high rectangular structure, a large head, and kokoshnik-like decoration. The bell tower's architecture was masterfully integrated with the form of the previous chapel. Romanesque and Russian styles merged into a single whole. The modest decoration of the church's facades is emphatically symbolic – drops of grace under the cornices, arches of the heavenly vault, kokoshniks flaming with prayer. These details display a particular precision in the embodiment of symbolic meanings, characteristic of the aesthetics of Russian Art Nouveau. The church became one of one of the most beautiful religious buildings in Daugavpils, whose architectural forms clearly reveal the hand of a professional. The prototype for the stone Gaikovskaya bell tower, built in 1907, as well as the tall bell tower of the Riga Grebenshchikov Church, can be seen in the famous Ivan the Great of the Moscow Kremlin. The Riga bell tower was built a year earlier, in 1906, according to the design of the architect Alexander Schmeling. The Gaikovskaya bell tower is smaller in scale, but the shapes of both bell towers are very similar, as if "made in the same handwriting," suggesting that the renowned Riga architect was the architect here as well. In 1941, during the German invasion, the church burned down. In 1947, despite the difficulties of the post-war period, the chapel was restored and remains in its original form to this day.



Figure 4. Bell tower of the Gaikovskaya prayer house in Dvinsk (Daugavpils), 1907.



Figure 5. Bell tower of the Holy Dormition Chapel in Riga, 1906, architect Alexander

Schmeling. Other city prayer houses are also interesting in their own way. Of the stone churches, the most complete technical information has been preserved for the Griva Intercession Church [3] in Daugavpils. The difficulties with which the Assumption Church of the Malyutkinsko-Yudovskaya Community of Dvinsk was restored after the flood of 1922 have not been forgotten. Archival documentation is available for the stone bell tower of the Old Forstadt Intercession Church in Dvinsk, the dominant feature of the entire community church complex. These three churches were built in the 1930s, almost simultaneously. This likely explains the similarity of their volumetric compositions: the bell towers of all three are attached to the main volume of the building, covered with a gable roof. This technique, typical of Protestant churches, was probably borrowed in the 20th century, under the forced conditions of the integration of Old Believers into the cultural environment of the Republic of Latvia. Previously, until the early 20th century, Old Believer churches consistently retained a different volumetric composition–with a bell tower "growing" from the roof. Unfortunately, it was this attached bell tower that was chosen as a model for imitation in our own day – in the construction of the prayer house in Voitishki. But while in the Griva prayer house, through decoration, this borrowed form was able to imbue it with the recognizable features of an Old Believer church, and in the Old Forstadt bell tower, through a naive interpretation, a striking canonical image was created, today in Voitishki, a creative transformation of form has failed, as the builders failed to "penetrate the spirit of tradition," and the nuances of the symbolic meanings of form and decoration were forgotten. The prayer room turned out to be a mechanical copy of a Protestant church. Unfortunately, a similar

primitivism also distinguishes the new baptistery of the Old Forstadt community, built next to the old church. The placement and structure of the small heads crowning the roof of the new building does not correspond to the canon: the spherical shape is not developed according to symbolic meanings (the base of the head is missing), but is tightly covered with metal along with the drum-neck, like a roof. The eastern head stands directly on the end wall, copying the shape of the chimney. These unfortunate errors indicate that the construction of the baptistery's top forgot the primary canonical meaning inherent in the head of the church – the symbol of Christ, the Head of the Universal Church. This determines not only the shape of the head but also its placement precisely above the center of the main prayer space of the church.



Figure 6. The bell tower of the Griva Chapel in Daugavpils, 1936, Engineer Ya. Sinyavsky.

A hundred years ago, there were no such mistakes. The Annunciation Church of the Niederkun congregation in Dvinsk, built in 1907, is noteworthy for its faithful adherence to tradition, replicating the forms of wooden prayer houses in brick. A large head rises above a rectangular gable roof, its structural design expertly executed. The designer of this church not only replicated but also emphasized the most characteristic forms of the Daugavpils region, discarding any incidental details. The church's single volume with four windows, cantilevered canopy, and "growing" bell tower are recognizable from village prayer houses. If the traditional three-part fence with stone arched gates could be reproduced with equal precision, this church could be considered a model for the Daugavpils region.



Figure 7. Bell tower of the Old Forstadt Chapel in Daugavpils, 1930.



Figure 8. Niederkun Chapel in Daugavpils, 1907.



Figure 9. Niederkun Chapel in Daugavpils, cantilevered canopy at the entrance, 1907.

The interiors of stone churches strictly adhere to tradition. Typically, the ceiling of the main room is a wooden vault, integrated into the rafter structure of the roof. The availability of documentation and the durability of the materials inspire hope that the stone churches will be preserved in their authentic form.

Wooden rural churches can disappear without a trace; they are usually built without a plan, by communities with permission from the authorities. They are examples of folk art. All the wooden prayer houses we examined, built at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, share very similar technical methods, decorative motifs, and three-dimensional compositions. It's likely that a team of Old Believer carpenters worked in the vicinity of Dvinsk and built almost all of these churches. Back then, 100 to 80 years ago, sacred culture was an integral part of community life, the canonical forms of churches were not questioned, and well-built prayer houses were accepted as workmanship, so communities made little effort to remember the builders. The names of the contractors remain to be determined by future researchers. It is known that in the 1870s, Ivan Kondratyevich Molchanov, the son of a second-guild merchant from Dinaburg, was involved in the construction of Orthodox churches in the Northwestern Territory [1, pp. 73–81]. He *was an Old Believer* by birth, and the son of Kondraty Molchanov, who donated part of his land in 1884 for the construction of a prayer house in Gayka, along with funds for icons and church furnishings. Ivan Molchanov simultaneously peti-

tioned Vitebsk and St. Petersburg to obtain permission to build a prayer house in Gayka [1]. It is logical to assume that 30 years later, when the official ban on the construction of specifically Old Believer prayer houses was lifted, Ivan Molchanov's contracting business could have been continued by subsequent generations of the family.

Stylistically, the wooden prayer houses of the early 20th century were influenced by Art Nouveau, and historically, the choice of form was also influenced by the administrative subordination to the secular authorities of the Vitebsk province. The prototypes of these churches can be found in the lands located upstream of the Western Dvina. In this region, the river served as a natural migration route from the Polotsk lands to Latgale. According to the chronicle "Degutsky Chronicler," the first Old Believers appeared near the city of Dinaburg in 1659, having gone down to these parts down the Western Dvina from Polotsk. It can be assumed that the Latgalian wooden prayer houses embodied the ancient architectural prototypes of cell churches, preserved in the people's memory and carried through three hundred years of persecution by peasant settlers. Looking at the chapels, one can imagine the typical rural religious buildings of the pre-Nikon era, the first half of the 17th century. During the 15th – 18th centuries, fugitive peasants from Pskov and Novgorod settled in the lands of the Vitebsk Governorate, bringing with them the traditional type of cell church. By tracing the cultural monuments of Belarus in the Western Dvina River basin, one can find characteristic architectural solutions that have much in common with the chapels of the Daugavpils region, for example, the oldest Orthodox church in the Vitebsk region – the Church of the Archangel Michael in Chereya, Chashniki District (1601–1604). The similarity of architectural forms confirms the historical information contained in the chronicle "The Degutsky Chronicler".

In 1666, at the Great Moscow Council, defenders of the Old Faith challenged Patriarch Nikon for the New Jerusalem, viewing the monastery's construction as evidence of the coming of the Antichrist. The Solovetsky Monastery, a "stone pillar" of the true faith, became a stronghold of piety for the Old Believers. The Solovetsky Fathers condemned the attempt to build a New Jerusalem, formally copying the holy city as an architectural model on Russian soil. They interpreted the idea of similitude to the Heavenly City as a sacred space for true believers, a land of spiritually renewed community, rather than new buildings. This fundamental opposition expressed different understandings of piety and different attitudes toward the symbols and images of church art [4]. These differences led to the Old Believers' rejection of the new architectural style and their rejection of the external decoration of churches – the ornamentation that had developed in Russian Orthodox church construction since the second half of the 17th century. From this time on, the formation of a unique, severe aesthetic of the Old Believers began, oriented towards ancient architectural models, which was reflected in rural development.

The peasant worldview of the "simple" settlers was not characterized by intricate searches for theological justifications for architectural forms. This is also evidenced by the dedication of churches: as a rule, chapels were consecrated in honor of the Holy Trinity, the Most Holy Theotokos (the feasts of the Theotokos vary), and the beloved patron saint of the peasants, St. Nicholas. Similarly, "without further ado," religious buildings were erected in the villages – simple, in traditional forms, using proven technical methods. Everyday contact with "outsiders" was discouraged in the Old Believer community, which also contributed to the preservation of the ancient building tradition in its undistorted form. In Latgale, right up until the 1920s and 1930s, a kind of sanctuary of ancient national culture existed, as noted by many representatives of the Russian diaspora who visited Latvia in those years. Andrei Sedykh "discovered pre-Petrine Russia" in Latgale, and the scenes of Old Believer life he saw reminded Ivan Shmelev of "dormant unconscious memories of the ancient, of the past [5]." In relation to prayer houses, it should be noted that for technical reasons, it is the construction tradition

that is most characteristic conservatism against the background of other manifestations of the cultural phenomenon.

Having grown from ancient Russian roots, the Old Believer building tradition retained its key affinities with Russian urban culture. The sparse population of the Russian state after the Tatar-Mongol invasion persisted until the 15th century, when settlements began to expand. In the 16th and 17th centuries, manorial land ownership developed in Russian lands (except in the north), stimulating the development of villages. Villages remained relatively small – a few peasant households – while in villages, the number of households began to number in the dozens. Village development evolved spontaneously according to the ancient tradition of circular planning. The village served as the center of a group of villages, with ordinary buildings clustered around a wooden cell church. Settlements were like "nuclei," in which village churches served as landmarks not only within the village but also within the populated landscape of the surrounding area. This spatial organization of the building corresponded to the traditional perception of architecture, characteristic of Russian culture, in which the main role was played *by volume surrounded by space* [6]. The architectural mass, visible from afar, required a distinctive silhouette and monumental proportions. Such features are also characteristic of the houses of worship in the Daugavpils region.

Unlike Protestant architecture, where minimalism arose as *a voluntary rejection* of the opulence of Catholic liturgical trappings, the asceticism and simplicity of Old Believer architectural forms were partly conditioned by prohibitions and political pressure from the authorities. Regional influences also cannot be denied. Some similarities between the architecture of Old Believer and Protestant churches indicate cultural interactions and stylistic borrowings by the Old Believers during their integration into the local cultural environment. Overall, these circumstances contributed to the development of distinctive forms, by which one can recognize an Old Believer church at first glance among the religious buildings of other faiths, and guess at its Latgalian origins. Our churches differ from their Belarusian prototypes in their distinctive regularity and carefully considered volumetric composition. Even today, these extremely simple structures impress with the monumentality of their design and the precise selection of details. All excesses were discarded, leaving only pure forms and the most important elements, filled with sacred meaning: the entrance gate, porch, roof, domed heads, windows.

All wooden prayer houses have a similar layout and design structure: a spacious rectangular log building with a flat beam ceiling, an attic, and a gabled rafter roof. Typically, the prayer house is built with three windows in the main volume of the church, and the narthex is marked on the facade by a single window, sometimes smaller. The design is frankly truthful, not concealed by decoration. The canonical enfilade of rooms is usually not expressed in the volumes. Among the Daugavpils prayer houses, only Danisheva and Rubenisheva have slightly narrowed eastern parts, but they also have a single roof. It is amazing how, working with such a simple form, masterfully controlling the proportions and the roof angle, the carpenters were able to create a multifaceted, oriental canonical image. The dynamic form makes the prayer room resemble the ship of Salvation, rushing along the waves of the sea of life. Above it, a single, unified being floats easily (not oppressive!) a roof that seems to protect, overshadow and encompass the cathedral Body of Christ, including the community worshipers in the temple. Wooden prayer houses do not have a domed vault, but we see the interpretation of the main idea of an Orthodox church, which the canonical cross-headed structure of the interior is intended to express – the descent from heaven of a merciful God, paternally overshadowing the faithful gathered in the church – in the exterior volume, overshadowed by the roof. This image was best embodied in the prayer houses of Danishevka, Korolevshchina, Bondarishki.



Figure 10. Danishevskaya prayer house, after 1925.



Figure 11. Bondarish prayer house, 1925.

The sacred significance of the eastern part of the church is usually emphasized by the domed cupola, while the bell tower rises on the western side, dominating the spatial composition. The surviving heritage allows us to trace the evolution of this form. The original version was a small bell tower, seemingly "growing" through the roof, as in the Krivanskaya and Bondarishskaya chapels. This spatial solution is traditional for the wooden architecture of the Slavic peoples; similar prototypes can be found among the rural churches of the Polotsk region, Pskov and Novgorod regions. Old photographs of the Korolevschina chapel show it was originally adorned with a small bell tower, constructed exactly like the first version [7], and later increased in height. Over time, this form acquired a different, more monumental scale, greater height, and a clear aspiration to the sky – such as the impressive bell tower in Pantelishki, no longer "growing" from the roof, but attached to the chapel. Tall, western-facing bell towers are common in Catholic and Lutheran churches in Latgale. Surviving intermediate designs in Krivosheyevo and Korolshchina clearly illustrate the process of adopting this architectural form. Interestingly, the bell tower shape was not mechanically copied, but rather reworked and adapted to the Orthodox worldview. The tall attached bell towers do not have the sharp spire that reaches into the sky, characteristic of Western Christianity.

The tall attached bell towers lack the sharp spire reaching toward the sky, characteristic of Western Christianity. They are capped with gently sloping, multifaceted, tent-like roofs, as is common in the Orthodox tradition, where the "floating" form expresses the idea of God's merciful condescension toward the faithful.



Figure 12. Korolevshinskaya prayer house with the original bell tower, 1918.

The large cantilevered porch canopies, typical of the Daugavpils region, impress with their laconicism. The term "porch" shares a common root with the word "wing." The builders of the prayer houses were familiar with this symbolic meaning of the structure. The awnings are inspired: they are not a canopy protecting the door from rain, but a divine canopy. A powerful, yet lightly "floating," seemingly weightless form is the first to overshadow those entering the church, directly expressing trust in God's mercy: "…in the shelter of Your wings You will cover me." (Psalm 17:8) Such awnings have been preserved in Vilkeli and in Subat, less impressive ones – in Pantelishki, Krivany, and Korolevshchina. The canopy brackets are usually lovingly decorated with modest ornamentation.

Unfortunately, the symbolic meaning of this beautiful form has now been forgotten. In other prayer houses, the canopy is supported by supports, or built over, turning it into a banal vestibule at the entrance.



Figure 13. Korolevshinskaya prayer house, modern appearance.



Figure 14. Pantelishskaya prayer house, 1907.



Figure 15. Canopy at the entrance to the Subat prayer house, 1906.



Figure 16. Canopy at the entrance to the Krivanskaya prayer house, 1908.

Heads and window frames adorn all churches, and the canonical meaning of these details is of paramount importance. The head of a church is a symbol of Christ, the Head of the Universal Church, and so the head was always crafted with particular care. Well-proportioned heads adorn churches in Korolevshchina, Krivosheyevo, and Pantelishki. The head of the prayer house in Bondarishki is of particular interest. It is not bulbous, but rather rounded, like a small head – a "forehead." A naive interpretation of the canonical idea can be seen above the bell tower in the Krivan Chapel, where the symbolic meaning of the head is directly depicted as a circular shape. Done naively, but sincerely and reverently.

At first glance, the window frames of Old Believer prayer houses differ greatly from the window decorations of wooden residential buildings, whose compositions bear archaic symbols of the sun and water, protecting the house from evil spirits. The walls of prayer houses lack such decoration, and the frames are simpler. Church art adapted the protective meaning of the frames, replacing the archaic meanings with symbols of the Angelic Powers in the form of flames, crosses, circles, and diamonds. Elegant decor appeared on the walls of Russian churches in the second half of the 17th century, during the process of secularization of church architecture, while the Old Believer tradition remained faithful to medieval simplicity and austerity even at the beginning of the 20th century. The unique decoration of the window frames has been preserved in the prayer houses of the Krivanskaya, Krivosheyevskaya and Pantelishskaya communities, and has been updated in the Medumsky Church.

The window is the "eye" of the temple, giving it sunlight, symbolizing the Divine Light, bringing Divine illumination. An interesting detail is placed on the western facade of the Ashuki prayer house: a small "rose window," a round window with radial mullions, depicting the structure of an eye. A similar window, but diamond-shaped, can be seen in the Danishevskaya prayer house. The diamond motif is often found in church ornamentation; it is one of the symbols of the Heavenly Powers. However, windows of this shape are more often found in Protestant churches than in Orthodox or Old

Believer churches. These details were likely borrowed by Old Believers from projects of professional architects or churches of Western Christians in the process of integration.



Figure 17. Chapter of the Pantelishi prayer house, 1907.



Figure 18. Chapter of the Bondarish prayer house, 1925.



Figure 19. Prayer house in Krivany, 1908.



Figure 20. Window of the Pantelishskaya prayer house, 1907.



Figure 21. Small rose window on the western facade of the Aschuk prayer house, 1909.

In Subate, after a thorough renovation, double-glazed windows have been installed in place of the old windows, the old window frames are gone, and the appearance of the church has taken on features reminiscent of Western Christian churches. Modest but distinctive window frames adorned the windows of the Church of the Intercession of St. Nicholas in the Old Forstadt Community in Daugavpils. The log structure was recently demolished, making way for a new aerated concrete building. Chronologically, the wooden portion of this church was the oldest structure among the existing houses of worship, consecrated in 1890. From a cultural perspective, the church was interesting because, by looking at it, one could trace the entire construction process. It is known that initially, a log structure without any signs of worship was erected. Then, in 1905, after official policy was relaxed, a free-standing wooden bell tower was added. In 1930, a stone bell tower was added to the log structure. The church remained in this form until 2005. The community maintains an old reconstruction plan for the church, which was not fully implemented in 1930. A major renovation would have allowed not only the rotten log structure to be replaced but also the original plan to install an interesting wooden vault in the prayer room. Unfortunately, this monument of pre-reform culture has already been lost.

A similar copy of the demolished log house can be seen in the Medum community, where the prayer house and the free-standing bell tower were built later, but probably based on the model of the Old Forstadt Church. The Medum Church is smaller, but the general appearance and proportions of the volume, the finishing of the roof cornice and the corners of the log house are the same. The prayer house was recently renovated, with the original forms carefully preserved, resulting in a very beautiful result. If the cantilevered porch canopy is also restored, the Medum Church will become the only building in the region where a typical pre-reform Old Believer prayer house can be seen.

Scientific study of heritage requires documenting all changes to the object. This means that before removing any part for repair, it must be photographed, and it would also be a good idea to measure and sketch it. This is usually not done even when demolishing structures. What did the authentic window frames in Medumi look like? It would be interesting to compare them with those of the Old Forstadt Church.



Figure 22 The Medumskaya prayer house after renovation.



Figure 23. Window of the Medum Chapel.

The old gates surrounding the prayer houses are also noteworthy. The fence is designed to separate the sacred space from the bustle of everyday life; it is the first sign of Christian faith for those entering the church. These structures do not always have a physically perfect shape, but they express the idea quite canonically. Typically, the gates were three-part in honor of the Holy Trinity, with an arch, the middle section higher than the side sections – a sign of a hierarchical worldview. The gates were usually decorated with a niche for an icon of the Savior and crosses – the main sacred symbols. Overall, the appearance of the gates reminded those entering them of the composition of an interior iconostasis. Such gates have survived only in Pantelishki, Krivosheyevo, and Vilkelya.

So what is the beauty of modest wooden churches?

In the integrity and organicity of the architectural image, in which the austere spirit of the old faith, the symbolism of forms, and the art of carpentry are "inseparably" united. According to the Orthodox worldview, integrity is the main attribute of beauty. This must always be remembered when undertaking the renovation of a prayer house or the construction of a new church. Damage to any of these components destroys beauty. The prayer houses in Bondarishki and Vilkeli can be called examples of organic simplicity. In these modest buildings, the skilled work of carpenters, their subtle "sense of material" and the clear expression of the main symbolic meanings of architectural forms are organically intertwined; they seem to have been built "in one breath," form and content are unified here. Frank Lloyd Wright (1869 – 1959) wrote: "…organic architecture is an 'inside-out' architecture, in which integrity is the ideal. We do not use the word 'organic' in the sense of 'belonging to the plant or animal kingdom.' …I soon became convinced that organic simplicity possesses the potential for genuine relationship, and the beauty I felt corresponded to the expression of this relationship. Squalor is not simplicity…" [8].



Figure 24. Gates of the Pantelishskaya prayer house, 1907.



Figure 25. Gates of the Vilkelskaya prayer house, 1925.

The thoughtless use of new building materials can undermine the integrity inherent in the traditional appearance of a church. Embarrassing inconsistencies occur even in buildings where renovations have been carried out with the highest quality. Originally, prayer houses had roofs covered with shingles or wood chips, later with sheet metal with standing seams. During the Soviet era, some roofs were covered with corrugated slate; today, they are covered with corrugated steel. Wooden roofing is the most organically suited to log construction, and the calm, grand rhythm of standing seam joints also does not contradict the monumental nature of the image. The fine rhythm of the covering, as on the new roofs in Rubenishki and Medumi, introduces excessive fragmentation, nervousness, and a reduction in scale.

In the future, the prayer house in Volodino will have to be rebuilt on the foundations of the burned-down church. What will it be made of? Sand-lime brick or aerated concrete? Is there any hope that its architectural appearance will be fully restored?

Conclusions. Sixteen years have passed, and it's time to take stock. Some Old Believer communities, such as the Grebenshchikov Community in Riga, the Novostroenskaya Community in Daugavpils, and the Liepaja Community, strictly adhere to scientific principles of heritage preservation, and there is hope that Old Believer architectural monuments will be preserved. In other communities, unfortunately, European style repairs continue. The traditional design of the heads of the houses of prayer is in danger of destruction and oblivion. All heads were erected over Old Believer houses of prayer approximately 120 years ago; their wooden structure now requires major repairs, so a widespread replacement of the heads has begun. The construction of the church head was developed by folk genius over the course of 1,000 years, comprehending the profound symbolic meaning of this architectural form, unique to Orthodox churches. The church head is not decoration or an exotic external accent, but a symbol of the Head of the Universal Church. Symbolic meanings permeate not only the form but also all the elements of the internal structure, even the popular terms our ancestors used to describe them.

In the center of the head is usually a powerful supporting post, resting on the vault, garret construction, or base of the head. This firmly anchored post place the cross that crowns the church – the Banner of Christ. The structure of the head itself is a framework of an even number of curved rafters, called "zhuravtsy" (from Russian: crane bird – zhuravl') mounted on the "neck" of the head and abutting the post at their upper ends. The heads surface is formed by continuous or sparse planking along the outer surface of the rafters, which is then covered with a roof (wood, metal, etc.). This traditional design is beautiful in form thanks to its content, imbued with theological meaning. Information on the structure of church heads is now available in many sources.

However, in reality, the sacred meanings have been forgotten, are of no interest to anyone, and the heads construction is being "modernized". Builders are now erecting polymer "bottles" or lightweight titanium nitride "tin cans" on churches, or replacing traditional wooden structures on cuttings with water pipes and overlay mounts.

And all this is being done with the consent of the communities.

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