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***Unfolding the Life of a
Townhouse. Exploring 18th -
19th Century Townhouse
Renovations in Aizpute City.***

Balancing history with modern functionality.

Abstract

Every city possesses its own spatial appearance, a history that has influenced and shaped it, and the people who inhabit it. Various changes are inevitable, continuously occurring, with some being more noticeable than others. This research includes three historic townhouse, located in the city of Aizpute, examination. All three buildings have been experiencing renovation in recent years. By analyzing the historical plans of all three buildings over different time periods and other available evidence, such as photographs, façade drawings, research materials, and the current layout, common characteristics are revealed. The author found it particularly interesting to identify possible correlations between different time periods and how they influenced both the functional zoning and the overall appearance of the townhouses. Equally compelling was the characterization of current spatial needs and the present situation of the city. Notably, each of these buildings has a different future, each reflecting the diverse needs of the contemporary world.

Keywords

Aizpute, townhouse, reconstruction, building plans, track changes, history, future, decisions

The transformation and adaptation of historic townhouses in Aizpute highlight the intricate relationship between architecture, societal change, and preservation. These buildings, spanning the 18th to 20th centuries, encapsulate the evolution of urban lifestyles, reflecting political, economic, and cultural shifts over time. However, the challenge lies in balancing the preservation of their historical essence with meeting contemporary functional needs. This article investigates three representative townhouses, case studies, aiming to uncover how these structures transitioned through various uses, architectural modifications, and cultural narratives. The research examines archival documents, historic plans, and physical transformations to trace their journey from private residences to rental properties and, finally, their envisioned future roles, focusing on similar essential qualities in the restoration processes. The study underlines the broader implications of such transformations for heritage preservation and urban development in small towns like Aizpute.

The significance of the historical layers of Aizpute

The historic center of Aizpute dates back to the 13th century when it gained city rights. At that time, it was called Hasenpoth in German. The city exhibits many layers of development, signifying its important role as the regional center from the mid-13th century to the late 18th century. During this period, most of the cultural monuments were created, including the historic city center, the Livonian Order Castle, St. John's Church, the synagogue, the manor mill pond, and watermills, among others. (pārvalde, 2022) In the 17th and 18th centuries, the role of Jews in both the economic life and administration increased rapidly. As a result, the town of Aizpute had a large Jewish community, and its architectural evidence has been preserved to this day. Aizpute is one of the small towns of Dienvidkurzeme region whose historic wooden heritage is included in the national list of cultural monuments, thereby highlighting its significance and the need for preservation and further in-depth study. The richness and significance of the history of Aizpute are evidenced by the available historical sources, including the Aizpute City Book, postcards, coats of arms, and other graphic records. Meanwhile, the preserved buildings, landscapes, and spatial structure of the city provide insight into its cultural and social aspects. (Aizputes pilsētas grāmata. Hasenpoth's Stadtbuch. 1566 - 1910)

Based on this rich history of the city, the author has chosen to examine three case studies, focusing on buildings for which the following parameters will be compared: the year of construction, original use, building materials used, analysis of the building's volume, architectural, and functional details, documented stages of changes up to the present day, and the planned functional and visual changes as of now. After examining all three case studies it is planned to draw conclusions, summarizing the common transformations of buildings over time, and comparing the applied methods.

“Architecture has its own realm. It has a special physical relationship with life. I do not think of it primarily as either a message or a symbol, but as an envelope and background for life which goes on in and around it, a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor, for the concentration of work, for the silence of sleep” Peter Zumthor (Zumthor, 2017)

Case study No 1 - Pasta street 5

The initial subject of examination is the townhouse called “Lēvenhaina nams” located at Pasta Street 5, Aizpute. Archival materials from Latvian state historical archives, corroborated by an architectural and artistic investigation conducted in 1992, indicate that the construction of this building dates back to approximately 1797. Archive materials initiates that land plot initially has belonged to duke Laža's manor. In 1782 Pēteris Bīrons, Duke of Kurzeme, signed a new lease agreement with the Jewish merchant Herman Wulf of Aizpute regarding the plot of land belonging to the Laža manor for the right to fence and build on it, as well as to sell it to someone else. Hermanis Wulfs built two buildings on the plot of land, and after his death landplot with both buildings was sold and repaired according to new owners, a couple named Lēvenhains, needs. Main purpose for buildings was townhouses for single family use – house consisted of 9 rooms with entrance halls both on front side and back side, with separate kitchen, cellar and laundry room, shed in the yard.



Figure 1. Image representing the visual state of townhouses at Pasta Street 3 and Pasta Street 5, Aizpute. 20th century 60-70s.

Investigation suggests that the building's volume and façade finishes have largely remained intact since the latter half of the 19th century. The structure is a single-story wooden building with a dual-pitched roof, forming an "L" shape. It is constructed from log beams in a post-and-beam framework, later treated with tar, and the roof is covered with clay tiles and shingle lining (Figure 1) (Ziemele, 1992).

The courtyard side of the building features several small extensions, originally designed as toilets and later converted into hallways. Substantial stone masonry cellars have been constructed beneath the right end of the building and the courtyard extension, which are prominently visible on the building's rear facade. Notably, the main entrance doors were particularly ornate and highlighted; it is important to note that the street facade lacks symmetry, with the main entrance doors positioned to the right, where a commercial premises once existed. Over time, the facade facing Pasta Street has undergone minor modifications, for example windows on the right side were replaced to smaller, by filling the lower part of the former commercial premises entrance and display windows. The facades facing the courtyard lack significant decoration, featuring wood cladding from various periods (Ziemele, 1992).

The floor plan of the first story of the building reveals four apartments, while the attic contains three additional units. These reflect the layers added during the Soviet era, when residential buildings were nationalized and subdivided into multiple

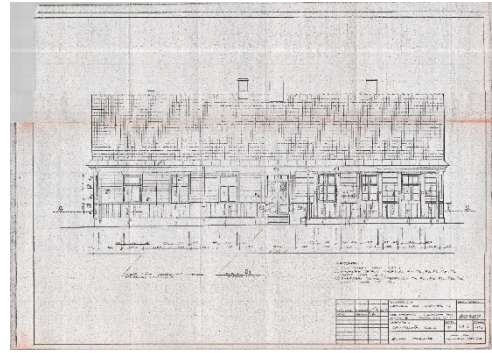


Figure 2. Measurement of the building façade showing asymmetrical façade, on the right side can be traced large window frame places. Restoration Institute (Restaurācijas institūts). Pre-project research was carried out in 1992

apartments to accommodate as many inhabitants as possible. Notably, the area in the first floor on the right, historically a commercial space, has also been converted and adapted for residential use (Figure 2).

In recounting the building's revival, it is pertinent to note that the structure stood vacant for approximately 20 years prior to its acquisition in 2022, with the intent to save it from collapse. At the time of purchase, the building's condition was unsatisfactory, with the courtyard side's roof partially collapsed, resulting in the partial collapse of an exterior wall and the foundations. Despite these issues, the new owner decided to restore the building, partially reinstating its original functions on the street side by designating spaces for a restaurant and commercial premises, and restoring the original facade rhythm by installing floor-to-ceiling windows for the shop. The rear of the building is planned to be renovated into a rental apartment, expanding its space to include the attic, thereby creating a two-story unit. Additionally, the cellar is intended to be converted into a wine cellar (Figure 3). Since it is not possible for us to examine the original building plans and other technical documentation, the owner's future vision is partially based on this 1992 study, its plans, and conclusions. For example, one of the

valued aspects is the restoration of the commercial space windows located on the right side of the façade, potentially to their original form.

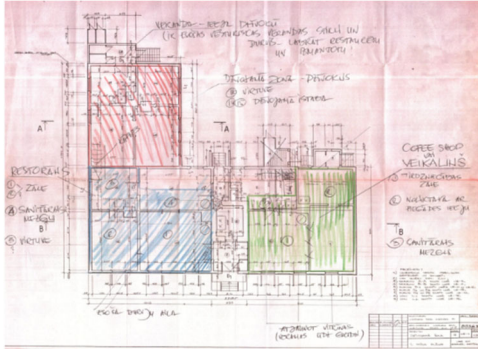


Figure 3. Building plan, complemented with hand sketches showing intended zoning of the building. Sketch of the owner



Figure 4. Facade of the building on Kuldīgas street 5, 60-70s of the 20th century, showing the building's well-preserved facades. Archive material of the Aizpute Local History Museum.



Figure 5. Image revealing renovated facade of the building on Kuldīgas street 5, renovated in 2022. Photo from owners archives.

Case study No 2 - Kuldīgas street 5

Right in the heart of Aizpute historical center at Kuldīgas Street 5, a single-story wooden townhouse is located. It was built in 1856 as a private residence for a local manor family from Aizpute. Until 1856, the main owner of the land was the Vecpils Catholic Church, which sold it to the merchant Herman Kristians Frey. The very next day after concluding the purchase-sale contract, the married couple of Freys pledged their newly acquired real estate, as well as the building materials they had acquired, and borrowed 500 silver rubles from the lord Moritz von der Osten-Saken for the construction of a residential house and an outbuilding.

At the beginning of 1857, the new house was almost ready, and Frey signed a lease agreement with the owner of the Padure (today Laža Padure) manor, Baron K. von der Osten - Saken. According to this contract, Freys rented out his house under construction with all the adjacent buildings for two years, starting from midsummer 1857, to the feudal lord of Padure for 280 silver rubles per year.

According to this agreement, Frey rents to Osten – Saken an apartment consisting of 10 heated rooms and a kitchen on the ground floor, and 3 heated rooms in the attic conversion, along with a bathroom accessible only to the tenant, a basement, a wheelwright's workshop, a stable with a hayloft, a woodshed, pigsties and small livestock sheds. (Silārs I. , 2019)

In 1898, the house was purchased by a grain merchant from Aizpute, who converted the building into rental apartments. The purchase price indicates that the building was in quite good condition. There is no information suggesting that there were shops or workshops in this house. According to materials from the Latvian State Historical Archives, the building was rented out as a single apartment, The residential house had unusually high ceilings for that time (2.85 meters), creating spaciousness, and additional indoor spaces were separated by double doors, indicating a

relatively high level of luxury, as well as the foresight to include a bathroom and a well-equipped entrance hall in the building at that time.

The new owner's vision coincided and took shape based on the above-mentioned period (end of 19th and beginning of 20th century), renovating it as a rental building consisting of two short-term rental apartments on the street side, and a long-term rental apartment on the side of the yard. Since there were no traces of the original layout, the short-term rental apartments were supplemented with small sanitary units and kitchen niches, partially preserving the layout created in the middle

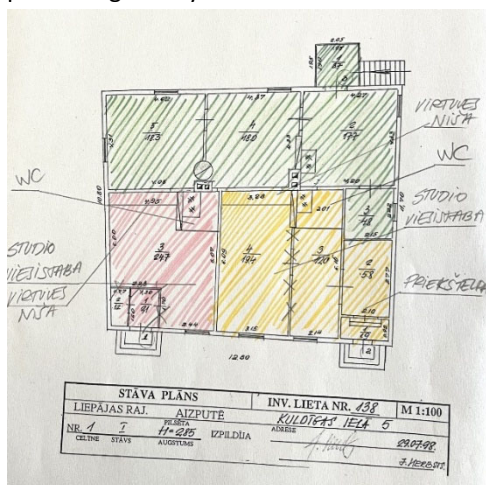


Figure 6. Building plan, complimented with hand sketches showing intended zoning of the building. Sketch of the owner.



of the 20th century. The interiors of the apartments are also playfully dominated by furniture from the 60s-70s of the 20th

century and other interior elements. The owner also sees the renovation of the habitable attic space on the second floor as an unrealized potential. Building facades, roof covering and details of windows and doors have been preserved or restored as found in historical images, for example the white insides of window shutters characteristic of city Aizpute.

It is noteworthy that such a plan has been chosen due to the fact that this is the only temporary accommodation in Aizpute, and it is relatively busy, demonstrating contemporary trends and the necessity for this new typology. Of course, no city aims to be overly saturated with a large number of short-term rental apartments, but in reasonable proportions, this typology is beneficial for a small city like Aizpute.

Case study No 3 - Jelgavas street 16

Aizputes city's development towards Kazdanga expanded relatively late and at a slower pace. Possibly contributing to this expansion in that direction was the establishment in 1904 of Gertrude Lindberg's Cardboard Factory, located at 5 Atmodas Street (Silārs & Santa, 2014). The development along Jelgavas Street has been very varied over time. In the city plan of 1797, there were once the city's meadows and pastures located here. The residential building at Jelgavas Street 16, was built in 1905 and situated very close to the aforementioned Cardboard Factory, now the metal hardware factory "Kurzemes Atslēga" (Figure 8).

The original plan of the building reveals a single-family townhouse, possibly with shop premises on the first floor, on the left side, at least that is what can be deduced from the 1926 reconstruction plan. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the building belonged to a widow, and the rent of the shop premises was one of the ways to maintain the property. Based on this plan of

Figure 7. Interior view of the short-term rental apartment showing mid century style interior. Photo from owners archives.

the household building made in 1926 and the drawing of the facade, it can be concluded that the entrance on the right side was more luxurious, with a vestibule and intended as the entrance of the owners' parade to the building, while the entrance on the left side was simpler, closed with shutters, and served as an entrance to the shop. This plan reveals the intention to rebuild the building, accommodating of two additional rooms in the roof structure,



Figure 8. Aizpute city map made by Julius Derling, 1797.

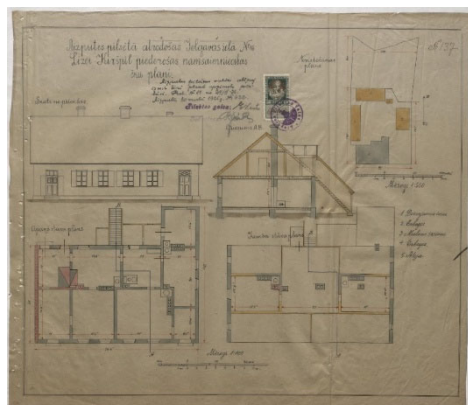


Figure 9. Plan and facade drawing of the household building made in 1926 confirming spatial layout of plans and facades at that time, and depicting the planned changes affecting the use of attic spaces. 1926 Archive material of the Aizpute Local History Museum.

providing access by supplementing the courtyard facade with stairs. Most likely in the post-war years, to ensure greater comfort for the tenants, the outdoor stairs to the second floor were built indoors.

The current situation reveals a different layout, which is no longer intended for a single family but serves as a rental property divided into four apartments, with commercial space on the street side. These spatial changes that most likely occurred in the 1930s-1940s, was driven by the increasing urban population in the city. The significant reasons for this could be the growing influx of peasants into cities, the increasing number of jobs in factories, and the relatively easier and more modern lifestyle in the city. During these years, residential buildings in cities underwent significant changes in their layouts – buildings were divided into as many small apartments as possible, each with a vestibule containing a kitchen with a stove or oven and one separate room. This house, too, was divided and adapted to the needs of that time, creating 4 apartments and shop premises in front side, two of them on the first floor and two on the second. The toilet facilities were located outside, in the courtyard (Figure 10.)

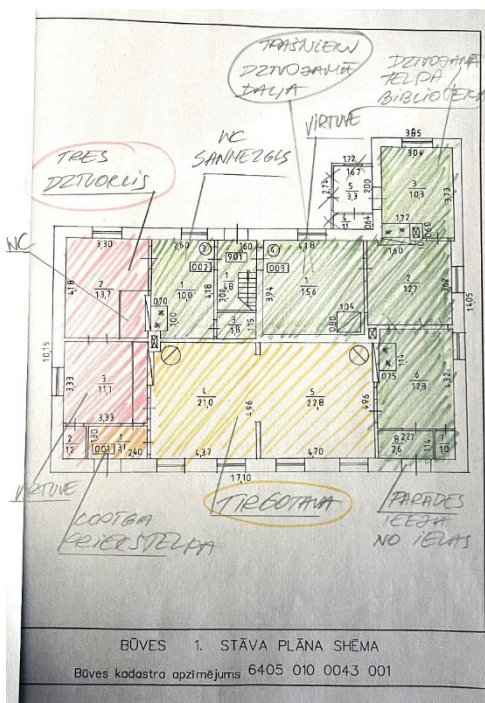
The character of this building has transformed from a single-family house into a rental property, owing to the adjacent factory which served as temporary housing for workers. One of the apartments in the first was kept for owners family use until nowadays. Over time, the facade of the building became adorned with various wooden extensions, as evidenced in post-war photographs, though not all have survived to the present day.

The future vision for the building is to preserve the historical (1926) facade on the street side and maintain its commercial functionality. Meanwhile, the courtyard side is to be functionally designated for a single-family summer home, with an increased window area to allow more light into the spaces.

The attic spaces would retain their functionality, serving as sleeping quarters connected to the first floor by internal stairs constructed in the post-war period. The materials for the facade and roof will be preserved as authentically as possible, restoring the building's original exterior appearance.

Each era dictates its own spatial and functional needs; building layouts evolve over time, adapting to the needs of people. In this article, I would like to highlight and emphasise the common aspect that all three buildings have changed their functionality multiple times during their existence. This can be observed in the historical and transitional plans of the buildings, as well as in historical images and descriptions. Initially, all the buildings served as city mansions for a single family, with or without shop premises on the street-facing ground floor. Over time, during the Soviet era, all the buildings were converted into rental houses with very small apartments. However, today, the new owners wish to view these buildings slightly differently, in line with current needs: the Lenevheim House is reverting to a

Figure 10. Building plan, complimented with hand sketches showing intended zoning of the building. Sketch of the owner.



somewhat modified version of its original function, becoming once again a mixed-use building with rental apartments and shop premises; the house at 5 Kuldīgas Street currently functions as a (short-term) rental property; and the house at 16 Jelgavas Street is regaining its original charm, being revived as a family residence with rental or shop premises. A possible explanation for these functional choices is that the size of modern families is no longer what it was a hundred years ago, and all these houses are somewhat too large for the needs of a single family in today's world.

Analysis Result

The study of the three townhouses—Pasta Street 5, Kuldīgas Street 5, and Jelgavas Street 16—reveals a tapestry of architectural and functional evolution emblematic of Aizpute's layered history. Initially conceived as single-family residences, each building reflects its era's spatial and stylistic priorities, including features such as high ceilings, log-beam frameworks, and ornate facades. Over time, socio-political changes led to their subdivision into smaller rental units, often stripping them of original elements to accommodate denser urban populations during the Soviet era. Noteworthy aspects include the preserved asymmetrical façade and tar-treated wooden finishes of Pasta Street 5, the adaptive reuse of high-ceilinged interiors and mid-century furnishings at Kuldīgas Street 5, and the careful integration of attic spaces and shopfronts at Jelgavas Street 16. Across all cases, a conscious effort to balance restoration with modern functionality is evident. The reintroduction of original design motifs—such as the commercial space windows at Pasta Street 5, reuse of the attic floor space at Kuldīgas Street 5 or the 1926 façade layout of Jelgavas Street 16—illustrates a commitment to honoring their historical integrity and the unique architectural heritage of Aizpute. Meanwhile, the varied approaches to spatial reuse, from short-term rental apartments to mixed-use developments, reflect

contemporary trends in urban living, mobility, and heritage tourism.

Concluding remarks

The residential buildings in Aizpute have undergone various changes, with their original plans adapting to the needs of each specific era, portraying rhythm of life of the people who lived there and reflecting all the political events of the 20th century. These various layers of time can be deciphered from historical evidence, plans, descriptions, and the buildings themselves. Although all these buildings are dated with different construction time, their spatial layout clearly marks several stages of change: initial function and layout of the building, a phase where the buildings were partially rented out, the later division into smaller apartments during the 1930s-1940s due to political pressure, and finally the actual layout of the building at the time of acquisition.

Just as these periods of change marked distinct needs and trends, contemporary times also highlight certain needs and tendencies. It is important to note that in Latvia, as people achieve a certain level of financial independence, the typology of summer houses (in small towns) is experiencing a renaissance. Meanwhile, mobility and remote work are driving the supply and demand for short-term rental spaces in regions. The planned functionality in all three buildings I studied reflects these contemporary trends and goes along the dynamic characteristic of the small town of Aizpute.

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