

Liga Treija
*Municipal Housing:
Development
Possibilities of
Uninhabited
Buildings*

Abstract

Since the mid-twentieth century Riga has been experiencing the phenomenon of migration to suburban communities, thereby allowing the city to grow physically, but at the same time leaving the city centre deserted. The aim of this research is to find out the possible causes of the empty building formation process and to discover ways that reduce the number of these buildings.

The research paper explores the urban development strategy with the associated planning tools created by the Municipality of Riga and examples of revitalization program development strategies of two other European cities that offer insight into how to lead rehabilitation projects successfully. The following methods are applied in the context of the research subject: historical sources, economic analysis and analysis of the real-life situation aimed at examining the reasons why a building is not exploited. In order to assess the potential of uninhabited buildings in the creation of a local government housing fund, Maskavas Forstate has been chosen as the study subject.

According to the study, it is concluded that, although the Municipality of Riga has conducted several studies and has highlighted recommendations on favourable development of the city by prioritizing neighbourhoods in need and by indicating the structure of the housing stock and its distribution, the city itself at the moment is unable to present a common action plan and an example that would lead to sustainable urban development; the future result is based on unknown strategies.

Keywords

uninhabited buildings, empty buildings, degraded areas, housing fund, rehabilitation, development

Introduction

For various reasons, several hundred uninhabited and empty buildings are found in the urban landscape of Riga City today. The geographical location of these degraded buildings does not serve as an objective reason why the buildings are not being exploited, as according to data provided by the Riga City Council Property Department on the website www.riga.grausti.lv, it is possible to conclude that buildings of this nature are located in the central part of the city, which has always been perceived as a strategically valuable area for both living and working. However, in analysing the economic and historical background of this area and the buildings, it is clear that the location of the buildings actually plays an indirect role in the degradation process. As the number of such buildings is growing, it is crucial for the city to find ways of limiting and reducing this number [1] in an economical and reasonable manner. That is also the main reason why uninhabited buildings in Riga have been chosen as the main research object.

However, the historic centre of Riga is not the only region where a noticeable part of the current urban environment consists of uninhabited buildings. A similar situation is also seen in the Agenskalns and Maskavas Forstate districts. The historical background of the Maskavas Forstate district of the Latgale suburb – initially a settlement of traders that, under the influence of the German authorities, was established as a Jewish ghetto in 1941 (Cita Riga, 2008) – most probably caused the low degree of development and overall negative perception of the Maskavas Forstate district today. This is evidenced in the large number of abandoned and rundown buildings in the Latgale suburb [2]. As per the internet site www.grausti.riga.lv, in the context of Riga City, the Maskavas Forstate district has the highest number of uninhabited buildings at the moment. Also, the poor performance of the real estate market in the Maskavas Forstate district reveals the unattractiveness that the area holds

in the eyes of potential residents, although the geographical location of this territory in relation to the city centre is considered to be very attractive. The question arises as to how to revitalize the territory, which is located close to the heart of the city but at the same time far from society – the residents and tourists of Riga.

Riga municipality explicitly suffers a lack of housing accommodation for the local population entitled to it according to the law “Par palīdzību dzīvokļa jautajumu risināšanā” (*Law on Assistance in Solving Apartment Matters*) (LR Law on Assistance in Solving Apartment Matters, 2001). According to the Riga municipal housing development program for the year 2014-2018, there were 4612 families in line for municipal flats on 31 March 2014 (SUS, Rīgas domes Pilsetas attīstības departaments, n.d.). Since 2002 Riga municipality has focused its work on supplementing the housing fund, in order to ensure the necessary number of living spaces of adequate quality. A local government-owned corporation, SIA *Rīgas pilsetbūvnieks*, has been established as a part of the action plan, responsible for the provision and management of the municipal housing fund, but not the creation of the identity of the city. The municipal housing fund, with its current financial instruments and resources, is insufficiently developed; as it turns out, people registered and entitled to have a living space will be able to receive it only in about 7-8 years. Since such a waiting period is unreasonably long, it may lead to a decline in the population of Riga, if we anticipate a scenario in which registered people will move to other cities, or even other countries, where they will receive the necessary housing support and an acceptable level of welfare.

In order to assess the potential of uninhabited buildings in the creation of a local government housing fund, the Maskavas Forstate district has been chosen as the main study subject of this work. At the moment it is an area with a large number of uninhabited buildings and a low population density, but at the same time it

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According to data from www.grausti.riga.lv, there are 671 buildings that are uninhabited or under inspection (accessed 04.11.2015).

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According to data from www.grausti.riga.lv, in the Latgale suburb there are 164 buildings that are uninhabited or under inspection (accessed 04.11.2015).

is the location of many high-level educational institutions and offers a variety of sports and leisure opportunities. The Maskavas Forstate district has a very good public transport infrastructure and it is the district with the most medical institutions (SUS, Rīgas domes Pilsetas attīstības departaments, n.d.). The aim of the study is as follows: to investigate the location and condition of uninhabited buildings in the Maskavas Forstate district as well as the main reasons for their formation, to find out the indices that characterize and promote development, and to analyse the future of these buildings by locating the municipal housing stock in them.

To achieve the aim of the study, the author will use the strategy of the comparative and systematic method stated in the *Spatial Development Planning Law* with the objective of examining the development programs, strategies and mutual interconnections of the research. In order to analyse the development and adopt the most appropriate planning principles, the analytical and comparative method for the assessment of Riga City and its abandoned buildings is applied by assessing the correlations and the action plan of uninhabited buildings of Riga and two other cities.

The stronghold of Riga City development – society, the economy and the urban environment

Riga City territory development and planning is provided by the Riga City Municipality Development Department. It is based on the city's long-term *Sustainable Development Strategy of Riga until 2030* (hereinafter referred to as the *Strategy*) (The Riga City Development Department long-term document, 2014) and medium-term *Development Programme of Riga for 2014-2020* (The Riga City Development Department document, 2014) planning documents, as well as a plan on the use of land and zoning development and realization. In 2002, Riga Municipality established a local government-owned corporation, *Rīgas pilsetbūvnieks* (further in the text – RPB), which is responsible for municipal housing development and implementation and carries out *The program for 2014-2018 of Riga municipal housing development* ("Rīgas pasvaldības

dzīvojamā fonda attīstības programma 2014.-2018. gadam") (SUS, Rīgas domes Pilsetas attīstības departaments, n.d.). As the municipal housing fund is to be developed in the administrative territory of the city, both the city's development strategy and the housing development program should be based on the same principles of development. After getting acquainted with the information mentioned in the *Strategy*, it is possible to specify key development objectives. It is stated that by 2030 Riga must be a compact city that saves resources, respects its cultural environment, identity and history and focuses on developing its urban environment into an educational and comfortable place for the local population. According to the analysis of the *Strategy* objectives, it follows that the strongholds of the city are: society, the economy, and the urban environment. The unifying element is the Riga citizen, who is trying to achieve a desired quality of life on his own.

The research conclusions and the summaries obtained are used in creating a normative database that supports the needs of the city for planning, development and maintenance. These planning tools are considered as the theoretical basis. The inco-operated partnership RPB created by the local municipality describes the role of the practical activity that focuses on housing-related issues. This organization ensures the development and maintenance of the housing fund owned by the local municipality. At the moment, the development of *The program for 2014-2018 of Riga municipal housing development* designed by RPB mainly envisages new multi-apartment block building projects along the outer border of Riga City (Figure 1). Nevertheless, the aim referred to as IM2 of the *Strategy* states that the economic development of the city should be stimulated by reactivating the already built but economically ineffective and degraded territory. Similar criteria are also set for the objectives of aim IM3, where it is shown that the city has many degraded areas where building humanization and an increase in quality of the environment should be facilitated. At the same time, this aim highlights the previously mentioned conditions that the city needs to be compact and should provide a comfortable commuting system; furthermore, it should also respect the

appropriate use of energy resources.

According to the *Strategy*, the suburb must be monofunctional with affordable housing that revitalizes existing buildings. This setting must be assessed in depth, in accordance with the UN-Habitat program (UN-Habitat, 2014) developed by the United Nations; nowadays, areas have to be mixed-use in order to promote job creation, reduce road use and ensure the provision of services closer to home. Single-function areas already caused problems in urban planning in the 19th century, after which the New Urbanist movement (*New Urbanism*) promoted mixed-function areas.

To successfully resolve the development of the building area and urban environment as well as the preservation of the character and prominence of the local area, Riga is divided into 58 neighbourhoods. One of the objectives of the *Strategy* is to define neighbourhood centres. The development activities mentioned in the *Strategy* are clearly focused on the goal of achieving compact and socially responsible urban development zones – defining priority areas around the city centre and mentioning the Maskavas Forstate district as one of the priority districts for development, with a focus on the living environment, by creating affordable housing. It reiterated that existing buildings should be revitalized, thus maintaining the neighbourhood's character and identity.

The second-most important priority is the revitalization of neighbourhoods with buildings constructed in Soviet times by maintaining and improving the structure of the inner courtyards and recreational facilities.

The action plan of the city included in the *Strategy* is focused on creating a building area close to the border of the city as well as on increasing the tax rates for degraded buildings, which mainly leads to the demolition of the buildings and thus, the loss of the area's urban identity and historically established structure and the reduction of the population and economic activity in the territory. Currently, it is obvious that the basis of the theoretical material created by the municipality – the study of the current situation with the development proposals offered – does not constitute a common action plan with practical solutions,

which causes a number of negative factors, for example, the extinction of the nearby districts of the city centre, the weakening of economic growth, population decline and the loss of the identity of the city.

Housing standards in Riga and their relevance to the needs of the population. The new municipal housing complexes

The area division of an apartment is regulated by several EU countries; for instance, the following rules are applied in Latvia's neighbouring countries: Lithuania requires 14 m² per capita, while in Estonia the regulations have several sub-conditions; for example, one person needs 18 m² plus 15 m² per family for a common use area. In the European Union on average, the current per capita housing area is 35 m² (SUS, Rīgas domes Pilsetas attīstības departaments, 2014). This is an acceptable size for a one-bedroom apartment, but not a multi-room apartment where the family also has a common use area, and each family member does not require 35 m², which, taking into account the Latvian climate, would require heating during the winter. In Latvia, currently there are no rules determining the minimum area of the apartment, but there should be such regulations, in order to provide a property that would satisfy people's needs and improve their well-being in the long term.

Riga Municipality's housing development program for 2014 to 2018 outlines the projects of the planned apartment areas, which stipulate 35 m² for a one-room apartment and 55 m² for a three-room apartment. This distribution of area is acceptable. On closer inspection of some of Riga City Council's latest projects, it is clear that self-imposed parameters of apartment size are not observed. For example, the municipal residential buildings currently undergoing renovation on Ieriku Street 28 and Aglonas Street 35 are being constructed with an average area of 16 m² per apartment (Figure 2). The total number of apartments on Ieriku Street is 45 in a total area of 1505.22 m², while on Aglonas Street the total is 299. The building reconstruction contract of Ieriku Street 28 provides for a reconstruction cost of 756.34 EUR / m².

Thus, it is clear that although the city

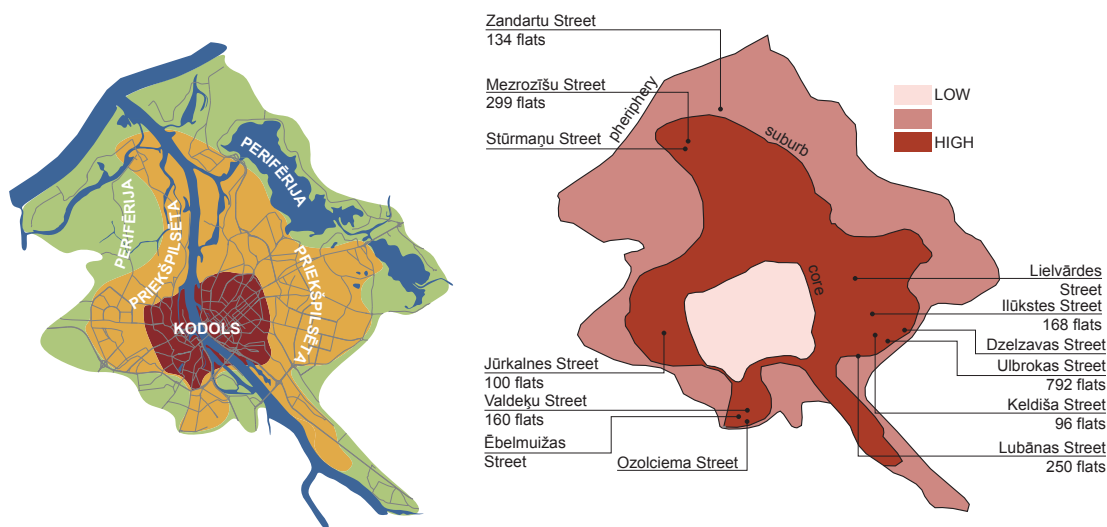


Figure 1. Riga City Strategy of density vs. planned housing fund and proposed density (Riga: Rigas domes Pilsētas attīstības departaments, diagram adapted by Līga Treija, 2014)

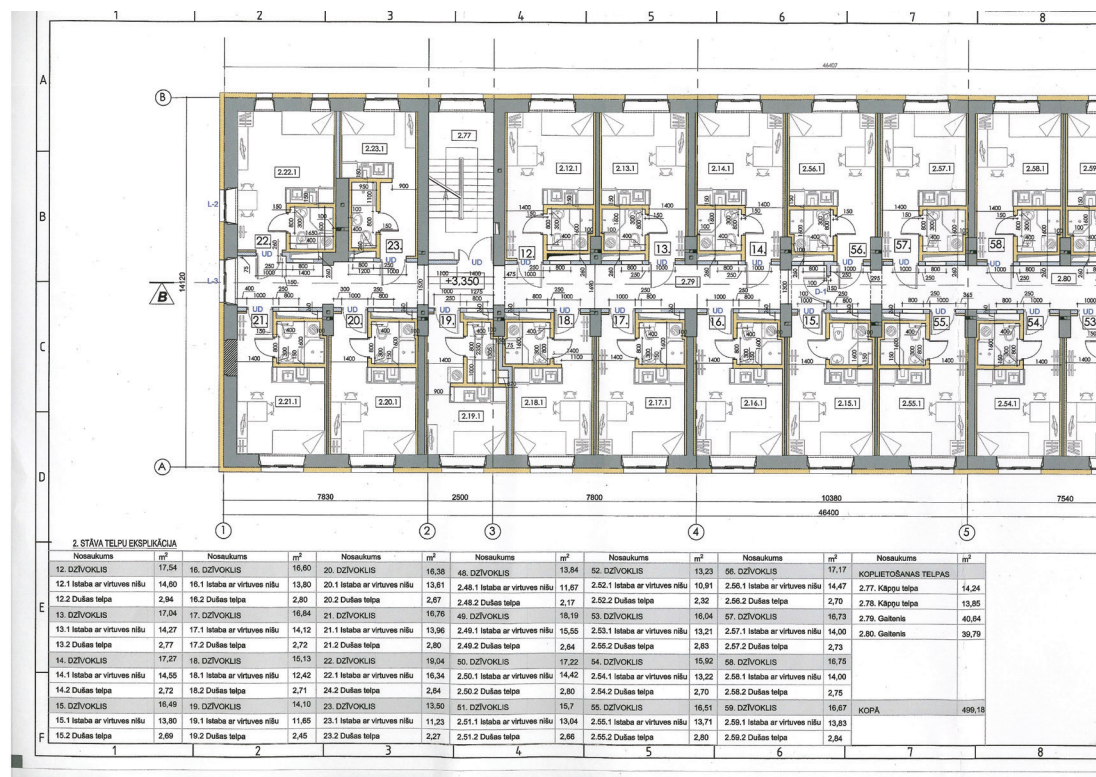


Figure 2. Floor plan of the municipality property reconstruction of social housing at Ieriku Street 28 (Riga: Līga Treija, n.d.)

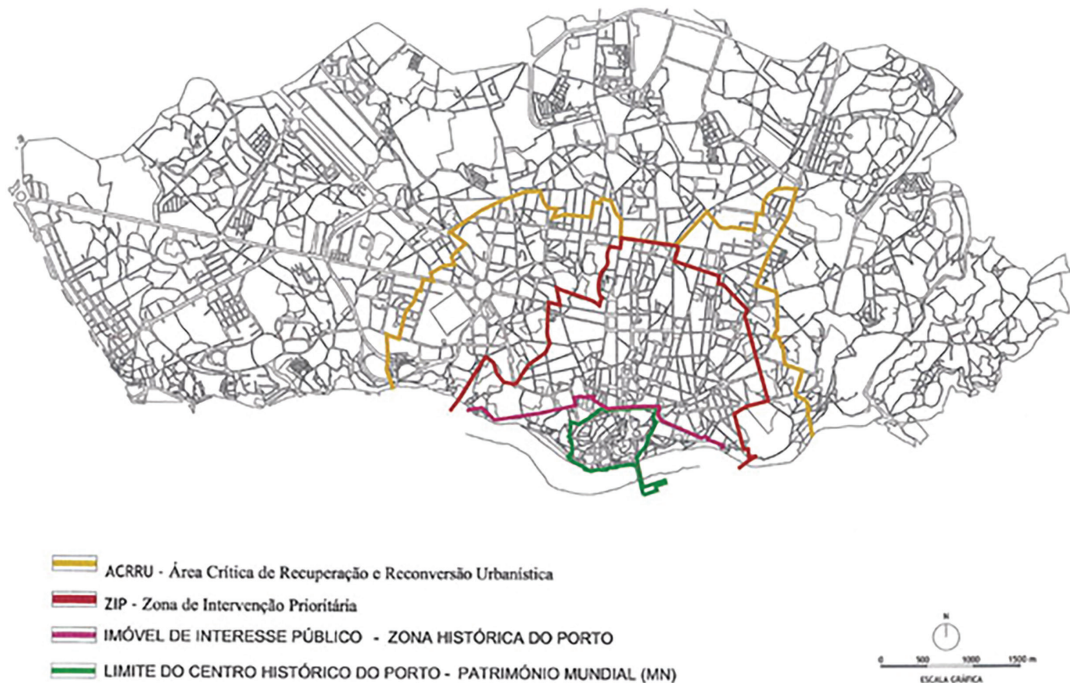


Figure 3. The priority intervention zone marks the borders of the Baixa district (Porto: Porto Vivo SRU, 2012)

has developed a number of studies and recommendations based on sustainable urban development, the general idea and a common action plan have not been clearly defined and do not provide a clear vision for future development.

Examples of good practice: the Porto and Ghent rehabilitation programs

In order to better address population growth and socio-environmental development in Riga as well as to see examples of how a local municipality can facilitate the urban development of a city, it is important to analyse the practices of other cities. The study looks at two other European cities: Porto (Portugal) and Ghent (Belgium); it analyses the state and local government action plans that aim to rehabilitate the parts of the city that have experienced an increase in empty buildings, physical and social environmental degradation and population migration to the city outskirts.

In 2001 a part of the historic centre of Porto

called the Baixa district had reached the lowest point of its downturn: approximately 80% of the residential buildings were empty or half-inhabited (Lobato and Alves, 2014). In the case of Porto City there are several different types of causes, which can be divided into groups. The reasons include historical-political aspects: the freezing of the rent law which was in force from 1950 to 2005 and did not foresee the increase in rent prices in case of changes in economic conditions (Teixeira and Povoas, 2011). As a result, the landlords were not able to properly maintain their property. In 1996, the city centre was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, which entails restrictions to save the uniqueness of the environment. Nowadays, the demands have changed, starting with the functional planning of the apartments and ending with the areas adjacent to the living environment, where one should have a recreation area and parking lots.

In 2005, the masterplan of the Baixa district's urban and social renewal (Porto Vivo SRU, 2005) indicated the priority zones in need of

development (priority intervention zones) (Figure 3), where the town government identified the key elements of development: residents, business, tourism, culture and recreation. In order to complete the set tasks, in 2004 the town created the Urban Rehabilitation Society (SRU) *Porto Vivo* with two stakeholders, the city of Porto (40%) and the Institute of Housing and Urban Rehabilitation (IHRU) (60%), whose responsibility is to implement the projects in real life by attracting financing and regulating the recovery process and to perform monitoring after implementation.

A public-private partnership model is used in the Porto rehabilitation process which draws on the support of the European Investment Bank and EU funds. In addition, there are payment facilities to stimulate the market. These include the creation of various institutions that offer different types of support for inhabitants, a tax reduction from 20% to 5% when purchasing or renovating a building, and special bank credit lines. The rehabilitation process uses two proprietary types: the organization *Porto Vivo* created by the local municipality buys privately owned properties and rebuilds them for renting out or the owner-individual, by using the support tools offered, renovates his/her property and uses it according to the housing function regulations set by the local municipality.

Another example is the Ledeberg district in Ghent, Belgium. Ledeberg is partly made up of 19th century buildings located around the historic centre of Ghent. The Ledeberg district mostly consists of 2-3 story perimetrical buildings that are located on both sides of narrow streets. The main reason why this district has experienced a degradation process is the fact that the local population has chosen to migrate to the outskirts of the city since 1970.

In 2008, the local government launched the project *Ledeberg Leeft* [3] and set forth six development directions: green, energy-saving, traffic, active travel, transport, and community. For the development of each direction an organization was created that specializes in the

relevant field or an already existing organization was engaged. In order to encourage citizens to get involved and demonstrate good practices, an organization called *Sogent* (established 1998) that is contractually tied to the local municipality bought 8 dilapidated corner houses in the Ledeberg district and built new energy-efficient apartment buildings with adjacent green spaces instead. The apartments are sold or rented out, but the profit is invested in other projects. The program provides the local government's subsidies of 30% and not more than 10 000 euro to support the renovation of one building. The grant assessment procedure looks at the maximal income level per household (Step Up, 2015). Overall within the *Ledeberg Leeft* project, a new transport connection to the neighbourhood street has been implemented, 8 corner houses have been renovated on behalf of the local municipality, a multi-story parking lot and 20 social apartments for seniors have been designed and 1,400 applications for subsidies of privately owned building renovation have been received.

Abandoned buildings and the evaluation of the future potential of Maskavas Forstate

According to the record managed by the Riga City Council Property Department, on December 16, 2015, Riga had 670 buildings that were considered degraded or were being monitored. This study tries to discover the possible reasons why the buildings are neglected and empty. Here again, historical-political causes are considered. Among them is a law adopted in 1991 on denationalization of housing in the Republic of Latvia, which was followed by the *Law on Residential Tenancy* in 1993, which approved rent caps. Rent caps were then abolished in 2007. During the time when this law was in force, owners of denationalized housing were not able to properly maintain their properties at the minimum rent, and consequently the housing was neglected and was no longer attractive for living.

Existing building areas with abandoned housing in Maskavas Forstate are located in the building protection zone *Maskavas*

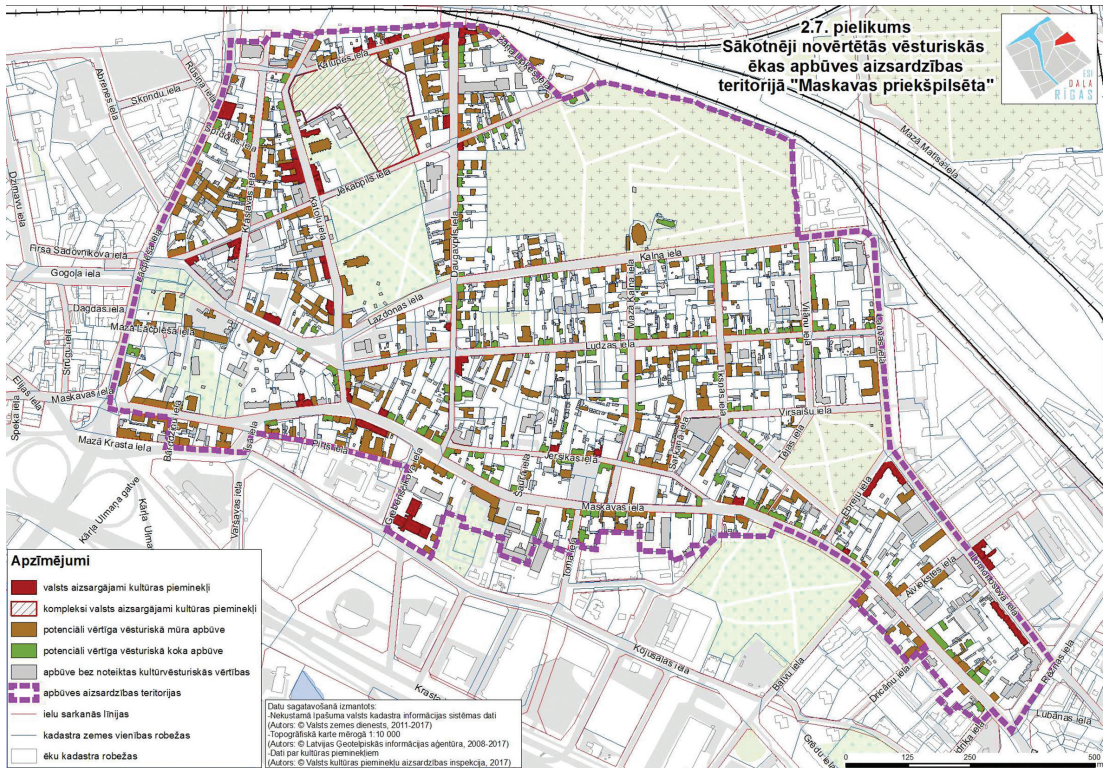


Figure 4. Building protection zone “Maskavas priekšpilsēta” (Riga: Rīgas domes Pilsētas attīstības departaments, 2016)

Forstate District (“Maskavas priekšpilsēta”) (Figure 4) and are thus considered unique and worthy of conservation. The problem with successful habitation of this area lies partly in the fact that buildings of the 19th–20th century, especially wooden constructions, are often missing utilities networks; they may lack central heating or even showers. The Maskavas Forstate district has been greatly affected by its historical and social background and therefore it is one of today’s most undeveloped districts with the lowest sales and rental prices, although the district is in a good geographical location with a good transport infrastructure and many green zones. The Riga City Council Development Department also conducted a survey that showed that this area is considered unfavourable due to its antipathetic people and neglected buildings, while closeness to the city centre, good transport connections and parks were cited as positive characteristics (Purmale, n.d.)

The neighbourhood’s current low market value in combination with its positive geographical

aspects could be successfully used to carry out a revitalization project with a reasonable financial investment. The study assumes that by taking into account the existing building structures (low and medium-height buildings), the population density of the Maskavas Forstate district could be raised to at least 100 inhabit. per ha from the current 42 inhabit. per ha. As the Maskavas Forstate district is located within 2–2.5 km of the city centre, it is one of the priority residential areas to be developed. Neighbourhood revitalization would coincide with the Riga City development strategy, which is responsible for creating a compact city with a clean urban environment.

Conclusions and proposals

At the moment, Riga has no specific strategy that aims to attract people. In addition, the existing planning and interpretation documents of the housing stock project lack regulation and monitoring, because theoretically pre-planned measures are not carried out in practice as they are supposed to be carried out according to the

documentation. In rehabilitation projects in both Porto and Ghent, the critical importance of citizens' attraction and involvement in the organizational structure of rehabilitation is emphasized. This means that the rehabilitation of a big city cannot happen without a specially designed leading organization that takes part in creating a financial strategy that monitors and controls the process and acts as a mediator between the local government, investors and citizens. When looking at the results, it is clear that, for example, *Porto Vivo* SRU played a fundamental role in the revitalisation process. Porto City faced similar political decisions that facilitated the growth of the number of abandoned buildings, but nowadays, the Portuguese government and the Municipality of Porto adopt political decisions in order to rehabilitate the environment. For Riga not to lose its population, and to preserve its urban environment, it is necessary to rehabilitate the degraded environment at national and local levels.

Some measures have already been implemented, such as decisions on the demolition of degraded buildings or forced organization of estates through property tax penalties. The Binding Regulations No. 165 adopted by Riga Municipality provide co-financing of 14 000 EUR for renovation of buildings with a cultural monument status, but it is too early to make any conclusions on the impact of this decision on the abandoned building organization process, as the law was adopted only on August 25, 2015.

Porto's financial support for the rehabilitation of buildings is divided between three actors: the municipality / state, investors and EU funds. As a matter of fact, in Porto private property is repurchased and the private person is not an

actor. In Ghent, they deal with the situation in a different way – properties remain with private persons or are transferred to the developer and the financial resources are divided between two actors: the owner / developer and the municipality. Riga's financial model could be made up of three parts: the owner / investor, local government and EU funds, with the option of excluding the owner, in case the investor or a local government repurchases the property.

The mixed-use principle of functions – residential, public open space or interior and commercial functions – should be implemented. Public and commercial functions would act as a “third space” for residents / neighbours in creating relationships and a social belonging to a particular territory. Following the well-functioning solutions of Porto and Ghent, the ground floor of a building would be devoted to commercial use, which gives a place vitality and addresses the social and environment structuring factors.

Based on the examples of other countries discussed, it is clear that rehabilitation of a degraded environment is a socially responsible, environment-structuring and identity-retentive solution. From an economic point of view, it may be less advantageous, depending on the building type, number of floors and physical condition. From the perspective of the physical condition of the building it is possible to conclude that the sooner empty buildings are rehabilitated, the less financial investment they will require and the sooner Riga will achieve its previously set aims: a compact city with a growing population, which altogether forms a socially responsible, educated and environmentally friendly society.

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