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***Towards Liberty  
of Thought***

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## Abstract

*Can newly built structures embody and endure the uniqueness of past nobility? This idea of permanence, and therefore of time, inevitably confronts us as we introduce ourselves to the manifesto of an architectural competition for a future learning centre, the House of Courage. The manifesto envisions the centre's planned programme and its mission to strengthen our youth's ability to resist automatic stereotypes and to promote the persistence of humane ideals in times of hardship. The genesis for this noble idea in a specific location on Mazais Balasta dambis can be traced back to a historic act of courage that contains an emotional dimension still present within the fragile urban context of Ķīpsala island, Riga. This extraordinary act of unselfishness is an event that deserves an empathetic and architectural continuation of its nobility, yet the amplitude with which the knowledge is intended to be passed on contradicts the intimacy of the place. Our decision to take part and tackle the apparent duality of the competition task forms an irreducible opposition that guides us in our eventual work, where we seek spatial genuineness and tireless approximation. A new space for education must be able to strengthen the character of the place and avoid certain peculiarities of public typologies that risk surrendering the authentic nature of the nearby setting. To respond to ideological unpredictability, we seek to study the principles discussed in object-oriented ontology (OOO) that permit the act of architectural decentralization to dismantle any form of spatial and moral hierarchy between human and nonhuman objects. In the pursuit of liberty of thought, it is the aura of the place that becomes the basis for the revelation of courage hidden within each of us. The following body of text reflects on our thoughts about belonging to a place and time and serves as a guide to our work methodology, which ultimately resulted in a proposal for the House of Courage.*

## Keywords

*Žanis Lipke, learning centre, freedom of speech, architecture, belonging, permanence, spatial mutations*

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## Prologue

Initiated as an extension to the nearby Žanis Lipke Memorial – a meditative space that reflects on the strength that lies within one of humanity's most tragic memories – the NGO “Memorial of Žanis Lipke” announced an architectural competition for the House of Courage in October 2020. The centre was proposed to be built in a land plot next to the Memorial and his family property in the historical part of Ķīpsala island, Riga (Figure 1). While the general mood of the competition was to build upon the past nobility of Žanis Lipke, it inevitably stumbled upon the problem of the mass and gravity of an architectural event in a fragile environment. Žanis Lipke was able to succeed under extraordinary circumstances, using the urban setting to his advantage, thus embedding the memory of his courage into the tiny streets of Ķīpsala. As our generation aspires to sustain the dialogue about the exceptional nature of his actions, we are also dangerously close to hurting the delicateness of the same context. The actions of Žanis Lipke are part of the layers of information that the urban fabric carries and should be retained for tomorrow's generations.

## Urban Context

The location of Ķīpsala island bears historical significance due to its proximity to local ports and the industry of Riga. Early on, a spatial character suitable for the local fishermen and their needs emerged on the island, accompanying their generally modest wooden houses with fragments of industrial ensembles. The character of the island remained the same until the Second World War – a time when the Riga dock worker Žanis Lipke sheltered Jews in his household. The urban fabric of Ķīpsala embraced an act of unimaginable human courage – countless souls destined to perish were saved among the island's timid and secretive streets [1]. In the post-war period, the

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Žanis Lipke rescued over 50 Jews during the Nazi occupation of Riga from 1941 to 1944; up to 12 people could simultaneously hide in his household in Ķīpsala.

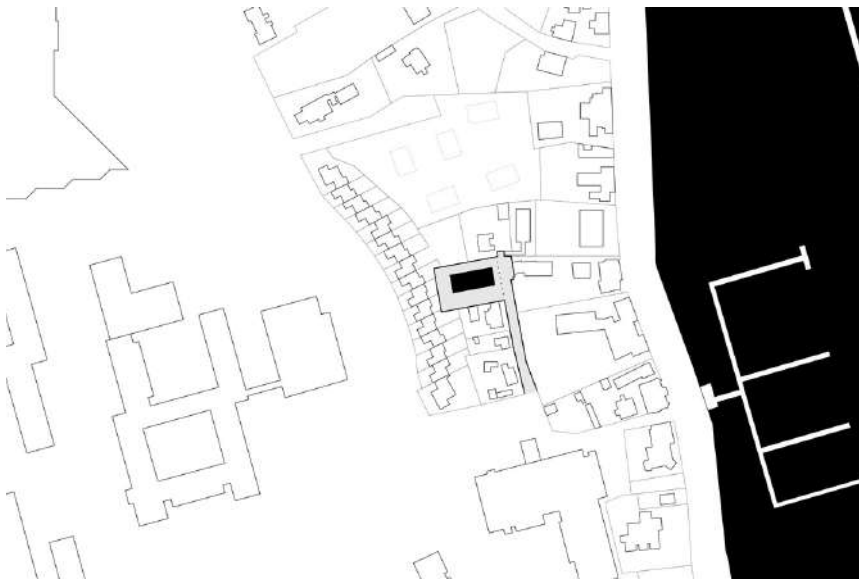


Figure 1. Proposed territory for the House of Courage (Riga: Reinis Saliņš, Igors Malovickis, 2021)

island gained a much more important ideological role – its natural location directly across from the city’s historical centre encouraged the governing bodies to imagine a new silhouette for the city, countering the historic outline of Old Riga. Soviet grand planning gestures added large academic and corporate ensembles to the island’s context. The western part of the island began its transformation into the nationally significant Riga Technical University (initially Riga Polytechnic Institute) campus in 1963, which is now a part of the *Knowledge Mile* [2] infrastructure and is included in the academic development strategy of the highest level. The southern part of the island just across Kalnciema Street, a major roadway connecting the east and west banks of Riga, at first hosted a former Soviet mouthpiece complex – the Press House – but is now transitioning into one of the city’s central business districts run by commercial and financial enterprises of late capitalism. The quiet and authentic part of the island is now partly home to the wealthy elite, who have transformed the humble fishermen’s houses into the city’s lavish “cribs”.

The historic property of Žanis Lipke is located on Mazais Balasta dambis, a secluded street invisible from any major accessways and sometimes even overlooked by the city’s maps. It has a unique atmosphere which is characterised by blocked wooden fences, lush greenery escaping hidden territories and the creation of individualized spaces within these plots. The street is an artefact of the past that communicates about the history of the place much more than any new addition ever could (Figure 2). Juhani Pallasmaa (1996) in his essay *The Eyes of the Skin* argues that “buildings and cities are instruments and museums of time. They enable us to see and understand the passing of history, and to participate in time cycles that surpass individual life.” The ideological aspiration of the centre resides in the planned location next to the Žanis Lipke Memorial. Designed by Zaiga Gaile and opened in 2012, the Memorial is a very well-crafted structure with an introverted nature, shying away from unnecessary attention. With its praise of shadows and a sense of materiality, the Memorial curates the individual’s experience towards an emotional reconstruction of the hardships that



Figure 2. Mazais Balasta dambis during November 2020  
(Riga: Reinis Saliņš, Igors Malovickis, 2020)

Žanis Lipke and the people he and his family saved had to face. The Memorial is a sensory object that, to use Zumthor's (2018) expression, embodies the feeling of history rather than communicating mere facts and information.

A closer inspection of the site reveals certain rules of engagement. While the archetypal public typology is an apparent mismatch for the intended location, ensuring the continuity of the past nobility is quintessential for the legacy of Žanis Lipke and human courage as a whole. The centre's anticipated programme indicates a potential expansion of the Memorial's educational capacity, meaning that the visitor volume would increase significantly and that the building would be better suited for a public campus area rather than a delicate network of streets and private dwellings. The prospect of hosting 220 [3] more people

appears to be completely foreign to Mazais Balasta dambis (Figure 3). Public buildings are magnet objects that attract people, which is why they are often used as planning tools to activate and improve certain areas and to involve the public.

The House of Courage would face a philosophical dichotomy if we attempted to adjust the privacy of the street to a more public condition. The nearby academic environment is an urban dimension that would be a better fit for such an institution – one that is more public, accessible, predictable and easily controllable. It would emphasize the programme of the learning centre much more successfully, broaden the centre's resources and

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The Knowledge Mile is a cluster of education infrastructure on the left bank of Riga, consisting of multiple universities, institutions and cultural establishments.

3

The competition programme required a space for 150 people with two additional spaces for 30 people each. Taking into account the employees, the maximum number of people present would be 220.

capacity and thus reach a much wider audience. From an urban planning point of view, an academic learning centre should not be established on the hidden Mazais Balasta dambis. It is a functional entity that does not fit the climate of the place.

### Confronting the Difficult

A well-established social and systemic comfort comes at its convenience, making genuine novelty harder to achieve. Inconvenience and its discourse are not schematic and programmatic positions that can be controlled with functional and pre-defined methods. While society's and especially youth's ability to resist automatic stereotypes can be practised anywhere, places that play by the rules pose a greater risk for authenticity and curiosity. Freedom from governing bodies and the liberty of thought inspires movements; their motivation speaks and establishes emotional contact directly with the individual. They are autonomous and usually form spontaneously – as an antidote to structured and organized processes and in moments of need for an alternative. A perfect and important example of remaining aware despite the prevailing opinion is Žanis Lipke, who experienced his most courageous moment in one of humanity's darkest hours and listened to his conscience, contradicting the predominant point of view. It is this exact notion that the House of Courage must employ – the ability to involve youth and steer towards a better future through the possibility of open discussion.

While the presence of an idea is external to a physical building, architecture has the ability to shape the setting and to encourage the individual to remain vigilant. The spirit of a movement – *an event* – is reflected in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1789-1794) (Figure 4), a work by the French neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David depicting the democracy of the collective act – the adoption of the republic's constitution in Versailles, at the peak of the French Revolution. Spatial uncertainty

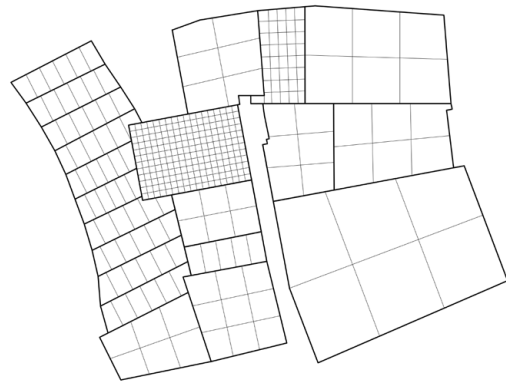


Figure 3. Defragmentation scheme depicting 220 more people in the proposed territory in comparison to the present human volume on Mazais Balasta dambis (Riga: Reinis Saliņš, Igors Malovickis, 2021)

over human action and the ability to spontaneously adapt to the occasion is present in the work. The adjacent spaces instinctively turn into grandstands and unite with the main hall, granting people the possibility to be a part of the event. By avoiding domination over the action, architecture immediately becomes a part of the movement and the process; it fulfils its duty as an independent structure and mediates the setting for human expression.

Emotional analysis of the given task indicates that a place where different generations can come together to practice courage and discuss difficult issues should exist. It becomes clear that such a place has to be free from the confines of the *system* and specific ideologies. Conventional design principles should not limit society's efforts towards self-regulation and an independent, critical and democratic dialogue. The existence of such a place is justified by the individual and their freedom rather than mere academic logic or the prevalent opinion.



Figure 4. Jacques Louis David, *The Tennis Court Oath*, 1789-1794  
(Paris: Paris Musées / Musée Carnavalet, P67, 1791)

In conclusion to the urban and sensory analysis of the task, it is still evident that functional and normative solutions are, no doubt, an essential part of sustainable architecture. These principles should be respected with regard to the future building, yet the presence of the formal should not articulate an integral part of the centre's architecture. The individual's experience and spatial literacy should be at the centre of the event that is the House of Courage. It should enrich the human condition in a way that an archetypal public building with a formal approach could never achieve.

### On Freedom of Speech

The importance of free speech as an integral part of society's intellectual and social progress was prominently argued by the 19th-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill in his essay *On Liberty* (1859) as well as many post-war thinkers. Mill identified not only the dangers of government censorship but also the threat of a social culture where diversion from the conventional results in peer pressure and potential expulsion from society. He states that "there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling" (Mill, 1859). Free speech is a basic human right that must always resist the domination of a single opinion. The idea that life is unthinkable and inviable as an isolated and individual act is at the heart of collective cooperation and mutual negotiation and therefore of social cohesion. Mill believed that the path towards righteousness is through collaboration and unification of different opinions because each of them likely carries a certain amount of truth. Such plurality of ideals was further defended by Isaiah Berlin, who argued that there are many genuine values. Berlin argued for differing opinions in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (1990), explaining that "collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are".

Žanis Lipke is a constant reminder of the importance of free speech and the liberty of thought. He was a single individual who thought and acted differently, becoming one of the few. "If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind" (Mill, 1859). While the Western world became much more liberal during the second half of the 20th century, the notion of free speech remains fundamental and concerns every new generation.

Despite a more liberal attitude in modern society, societal fragmentation tends to have a cyclic pattern and may resurface along with the usual polemic about generational progression [4]. One of the factors influencing the current generational tension may be the advent of the global Age of Information and the subsequent shift towards new emerging technologies that have brought different tools for public engagement. The onset of rapid information transmission has also paved the way for new kinds of manipulation techniques – psychological and emotional rather than physical – the effects of which are currently evident not only in certain marginalized or radicalized groups but partly in the systemic institution itself. The usually autonomous Western academia has since faced a wave of polarization and the rise of an environment where politicized skirmishes extend beyond intellectual reasoning [5]. American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) in his essay *The Coddling of the American Mind*, argues that the expansion of digital socializing tools has made the young generation much more sensitive towards differing opinions. Social "bubbles" have become more common, and personal confirmation bias has started to prevail over critical-holistic thinking. The fragmentation of Western academia over the last 20-30 years suggests that even

intellectual institutions are not exempt from periodic fluctuations. Even today – considering the possibility of the House of Courage – we find ourselves in a moment of generational, technological and political transition, which will inevitably bring about corrections in the order of public thought. The youth of the future should be able to critically weigh differing opinions and avoid the domination of one narrative.

The complexity of the competition task distances us from the generic and formal, which we believe would fragment not only the existing spatial context but also the idea of courage itself. To remain true to its mission, the learning centre must be able to withstand the test of time and endure the influx of generational dogmas that come with each new age. As Mill argues: “yet it is as evident in itself as any amount of argument can make it, that ages are no more infallible than individuals; every age having held many opinions which subsequent ages have deemed not only false but absurd; and it is as certain that many opinions, now general, will be rejected by future ages, as it is that many, once general, are rejected by the present” (Mill, 1859). It is impossible to predict the fate of today’s seemingly open way of thinking. What we think of as healthy, progressive and fair today might carry a retrospective context and be seen as a harsh past filled with prejudice. This may be true not only of our discourse but also of the means of material and emotional expression that we use as a society.

### **Backdrop for Human Activity**

The physical manifestation of the House of Courage needs to withstand the technological and visual aesthetics that come with the unending rainfall of contemporary doctrines. Each generation constructs its means of expression the same way as each era defines its principles. The continuity of thought indicates that our current

spatial needs may be specific to our generation and may be revised in due time. “Aesthetic and cultural practices are peculiarly susceptible to the changing experience of space and time precisely because they entail the construction of spatial representations and artefacts out of the flow of human experience,” writes David Harvey (1992). While revisions always happen, the House of Courage should avoid the “Tyranny of the New” [6] (Caruso, 1998) over humane ideals and ethics that have been shaped throughout our existence. The building’s compositional principles should complement rather than dominate the architecture. Juhani Pallasmaa (1996) writes that “we have a mental need to grasp that we are rooted in the continuity of time, and in the man-made world it is the task of architecture to facilitate this experience.” The idea of permanence represents the ability to refrain from fading techniques, allowing the building to belong to a history, to an atmosphere and to a place.

To become a backdrop for a yet undefined human activity, the structure of the House of Courage should be decentralized to resist the privileging of one object over another. Both the individual and the building should be considered as equal entities that reject any mutual hierarchy between the two objects, thus interacting freely. American philosopher Graham Harman, in *Object-Oriented Ontology* (2018), argues that objects can gain meaning through the perspective of human perception. By renouncing the anthropocentric view, human perception is decentralized and becomes a part of object-oriented ontology. Considering that material and space are objects that gain meaning through human perception, space – the aura of the place – and the structure also gain the ability to adapt to any intellectual and functional state. Furthermore, a *human object* – the individual – and a *nonhuman object* – the building – are to be considered as sovereign and

4 While abandoning the past and embracing the future was proclaimed in the *Manifesto of Futurism*, its legacy is evident with modern movements that produce countless manifestos for a better collective future.

5 The academic polarization is most noticeably present with the formation of the so-called “intellectual dark web” – an informal group of thinkers that oppose what they regard as increasingly authoritarian tendencies within progressive movements in Western countries.

autonomous objects with their unique structure and nature. Despite mutual autonomy, the building cannot exist without human activity just as the spirit of the movement cannot exist without an authentic and authority-free environment. Both objects – the individual, of the present and the future, and space – intertwine, activate one another and change along the way. The theory offers us an understanding of the possibility that can be the House of Courage and what questions the centre as an object may face in the future.

### **The House of Courage**

The constantly changing nature of the House of Courage makes it unnecessary to fully define its vision. The centre's character will be outlined by its main object, the individual and their discourse, the dynamics of which are impossible to foretell. Today's community will support the young generation's courage studies, but in due time, youth will begin to construct their own specific dialogue. For this reason, our proposal for the House of Courage is deliberately envisioned as a decentralized, imperfect and limitless setting for activity. The backdrop to this notion can be traced back to the competition brief, where many of the core decisions were left in the hands of the authors / architects. The proposed structure should be as liberal as the task set by the initiators. Any fixed solutions would fail this assignment, because we, the authors, surely cannot foresee the specific development of the centre over time. That is why the idea of the House of Courage is designed as open-source code and permits the incompleteness of its ideology. Just as specific materiality is generally important, it becomes secondary to the centre's metaphysical structure. The House of Courage is not about appearance but about presence.

The building's spatial protocol is a reference to its basic purpose, which allows us to shape the space for liberty of thought. The user of the building – the individual – is a direct subject

of architecture and an equal object within its ontology. The centre's spatial approach aspires to give each individual a platform for expression and the possibility to develop their voice and human strength, as well as the ability to create the story of the House of Courage. The ever-present layer of context shapes the architecture of the building and allows it to become a backdrop for human activity. The House of Courage employs the liberty of expression, permits the coexistence of different views and avoids guidance towards specific thoughts. It is the spatial continuum and the absence of the altar that liberates the space from designed hierarchy – the rejection of the stage is a recognition of equality among individuals.

The spatial structure of the House of Courage is a totalization of elements – a series of autonomous objects and voids that organize the internal part of the building (Figure 5). Similar to the fundamental principles of *Gestalt* psychology, each spatial object within the structure of the House of Courage is an integral part of the functioning of the system; however, beyond their autonomy, elements form a single whole, *oneness*, which is perceived as more than the sum of its parts. Although initially independent, the objects are united and can reorganize into multiple spatial continuities (Figure 6). Consequently, the organizational dynamics of the building are defined by another significant object: the individual who shapes the story and the aura of the place. The freedom of spatial organization, its sequential order, would not cloud the overall autonomy of the building's fundamental structure; instead, it would reinforce a true decentralization. The structure's authenticity would flourish in the face of possible unpredictability. In this sense, the objects also become elements of architectural experience; they become encounters, confrontations that interact with memory (Pallasmaa, 1996). Human activity fills the void and dismantles the border around certainty, allowing the required spatial composition to be arranged, which in turn permits

Figure 5. Interior view of the House of Courage (Riga: Reinis Saliņš, Igors Malovickis, 2021)



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“The Tyranny of the New” is an essay by Adam Caruso. In this case, the essay title is used as a term to symbolize Caruso’s and our search for parallels between the ever-increasing capitalist society and newness in architecture.

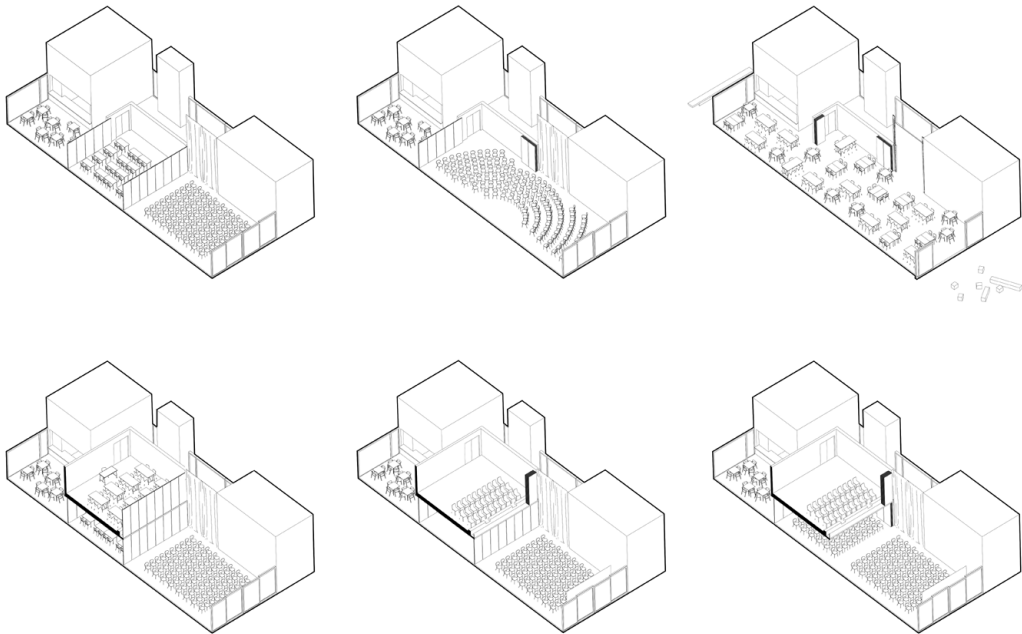


Figure 6. Spatial mutations  
(Riga: Reinis Saliņš, Igors Malovickis, 2021)

the House of Courage to fulfil its mission. “The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them,” writes Henri Bergson (1991). Without the individual, the building becomes a regular, autonomous spatial entity.

## Epilogue

The intended location has no room for careless strategies that can hurt the privacy of the neighbouring dwellings, making the centre’s anticipated programme a difficult fit for the place. The building’s metaphysical structure supports equality and rejects vertical hierarchy, demonstrating that a responsible approach to the emotional and human condition involves purging the irrelevant. The competition requirement to create a roof terrace or a visual landmark would

strengthen the sensation of rising above everybody else, just as it would expose the usually hidden neighbouring backyards. This semantic condition is satisfied by the winning proposal but strongly opposed by us. It contradicts the defining aspects of the place, which are the only conditions that justify the possibility of the learning centre in that specific location. The quiet character of the neighbourhood does not demand visual stimulation, activity or eyes on the street [7]. The building should be able to balance between the specificity of the place and the authenticity of its function – it should be able to absorb public flows but avoid extroversion towards the

neighbouring environment (Figure 7 and 8). Its physical manifestation should complement the modesty of local wooden architecture, embodying its simplicity and spatial tectonics developed over time. As Adam Caruso (2001) states in his essay *The Emotional City*, architecture should be sensitive to those emotional qualities that define the city, melancholy, expectance, pathos and hope. It is the sense of belonging that guides us in our attempts to construct the building with a material that matures and changes with the passing of time, linking it to a historical memory and the tangible reality of the place. "All matter exists in the continuum of time; the patina of wear adds the enriching experience of time to the material of construction," writes Juhani Pallasmaa (1996). The compromise between the public and the private allows us to establish a link to the Žanis Lipke Memorial through the means of semantic opposition. While the Memorial remains completely introverted, the House of Courage should invite the public. The new centre is not conceived as a statement in front of the Memorial, but merely as a continuation of the knowledge it represents, obtained in difficult times of colossal courage.

The House of Courage should be a place where individuals can form intellectual revolutions, be unafraid to speak out, and where the possibility of a parallel culture [8] is articulated and discussed. Change is a messy and difficult process, but one that needs to happen from time to time, which is why the House of Courage should become the amplifier of society and a place to come together and grow. It needs to become a place that nurtures fearlessness and intellectual confrontation of the difficult because that is the only way we as a society can grow and mature.

We the authors do realize that it is impossible to escape the layers of the present time. Our intent is to look for conceptual justification for various architectural manipulations and their true nature, which does not speak of beauty *per se* but represents our vision of authenticity and lasting values.

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7  
"Eyes on the street" is a term introduced by the American activist Jane Jacobs in talking about humanizing neighbourhoods, allowing more people to be out on the streets, thus making the urban space much safer.

8  
"Parallel culture" is a term proposed by the authors of this essay. It describes a hypothetical, decentralized and ever-present parallel medium, where free dialogue and resistance to censorship or external influence are constantly ongoing.



Figure 7. Axonometric view of the House of Courage  
(Riga: Reinis Saliņš, Igors Malovickis, 2021)



Figure 8. Exterior view of the House of Courage (Riga: Reinis Saliņš, Igors Malovickis, 2021)

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