

The Values
in an Old Rural
House



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HARJUMAA MUUSEUM

THE SPECIALISTS INTERVIEWED

Riin Alatalu – heritage conservation specialist and the coordinator of the Cultural Heritage Year 2013.

Targo Kalamees – head and professor of the Chair of Building Physics and Architecture at the Tallinn University of Technology. He has studied the indoor climate of timber buildings in the framework of the HEALTH project.

Mart Keskküla – restoration architect and the main architect of AS Restor.

Silja Konsa – Harju County senior inspector of the National Heritage Board of Estonia.

Jaak Kõiva – a civil engineer at the Estonian Open Air Museum, involved in finding solutions to new exhibition buildings as well as renewing older buildings.

Mikk Mutso – freelance architect. He is one of the four winners of the main award of the architecture contest 21st-Century Home in Lahemaa (conceptual design “Ranna-Niidu”).

Maris Mändel – a doctoral student and lecturer at the Department of Heritage Conservation and Restoration of the Estonian Academy of Arts. She is interested in studying the construction heritage of Soviet times.

Heiki Pärdi – research director and ethnologist at the Estonian Open Air Museum and a long-time researcher of rural architecture.

Ly Renter – Harju County senior inspector of the National Heritage Board of Estonia.

FOREWORD

Village architecture is a part of our cultural heritage. Over time, however, the use of historic rural houses has changed: modern people have new requirements both in terms of comfort as well as the energy efficiency of the buildings. If we want to use houses like that in the future, we need to develop renovation solutions which, on the one hand, would support the preservation of the buildings as close to the original as possible, and, on the other hand, would guarantee a living environment consistent with 21st-century standards.

In 2010, the project HEALTH, i.e. Healthy and Energy-efficient Living in Traditional Rural Houses, was initiated. The project was funded by the European territorial cooperation programme Central Baltic Interreg IV A. In this country, the activities of the international project have mainly, but not only, been focused on the indoor climate of old rural houses as well as the energy efficiency of the buildings. But in addition to the search for practical renovation solutions, the project studied people's choices – how and based on which values do they decide on one renovation solution over the other.

In order to illustrate the plurality of values in assessing an old rural house, in spring 2012 the project partners – the Harju County Museum and the Estonian Open Air Museum – invited house owners to collect before-and-after photo material on renovation works. In the winter of the same year, we asked the specialists involved in construction heritage to comment on six pairs of photos. It is important to emphasise that the experts had to evaluate the photos without knowing the stories behind the houses.

These photos and comments have also been published in this pamphlet. When studying the pictures as well as the owners' work descriptions and the specialists' comments, it becomes evident that there can be no single solution.

The past of each old rural house is unique. Both a professional and subjective opinion is reflected in the comments of each expert. The owners' possibilities and dreams also differ. Therefore, the beautiful future of an old rural house is hidden in the smart synthesis of the building's backstory, the owner's wishes and the expert's opinion.

WHY ARE OLD FARMHOUSES VALUABLE?

Research fellow at the Estonian Open Air Museum Rasmus Kask

I am sure no one doubts the fact that old farmhouse architecture is valuable – be it a threshing barn, a joint building, a small separate building, a manor house or a simpler outbuilding. Recently, more and more attention has been paid to the construction heritage of rural areas. But no matter if you turn your grandmother's threshing barn into a summer home, improve the heating of a farmhouse located on village landscape of cultural and environmental value, or stopping the decay of an old granary, you are sure to face practical questions concerning the values of the specific building or building complex.

Should you build a ridge roof of chippings or can it also be a half-hipped roof? Are chippings more traditional than a shingle or thatch roof? Should you try to conserve every decayed piece of log in the wall? Is a cement board roof ugly and should be banned from villages? How to improve the house's heating so that its outside appearance did not suffer and the solution was technically correct? Which division of window panes is suitable? When you are looking for answers to these questions, it becomes evident that the positive adjective of "valuable" is far from a single meaning.

Let us consider the building's age. How old should a house be to have age-related value? The heritage conservation movement may at first have been driven by the need to protect mediaeval and even older monuments, but now we already need to preserve 20th-century buildings that are only a few decades old.

Thus, you cannot deduce value from age alone – and the exact age of a farmhouse is often impossible to determine. Perhaps we are asking the wrong question: instead of asking "How old is valuable?" we should be asking: "In which way is old valuable?"

One example from fieldwork experience. Two threshing buildings, both with 150 years on their backs. The owner of one has fixed up the house according to the latest fashion – he has cleared the logs, polished the floor boards, restored the windows etc. –, but he only uses the house a few weeks per year. The other has lived in his parents' farmhouse for decades but does not have the means to manage it any longer: he is hoping that the next storm will take the roof, so a new one could be installed with the insurance money. The same age – 150 years – can mean authenticity, the possibility to refine and build, to show himself as a house owner and express a particular social status for the first one; for the other one, it could mean a heavy burden, amortisation and even feelings of powerlessness.

No building is valuable merely because of its age, beauty, type, form or material, but based on how someone values a particular building in a certain context and at a particular point in time. An owner sees in the building as his home, a heritage conservation specialist sees typicality or divergences, an engineer sees technical problems related to heating, an architect sees the play of space and form, etc. The plurality of perspectives means that there is no single truth to reveal the real value

of a building. For instance, the question of roofing materials often arises. Which one is the most traditional – reed, chippings or shingles?

I have often smiled to myself when I hear about the one traditional material (be it in a temporal or regional sense). It reminds me of one picture of an old Kihnu farmhouse; here you can see how the owner has renovated the roof with materials at hand according to his needs and options. Each time, different materials have been available and have been used randomly. Therefore, when you are renovating your roofing, it is not worth searching for the one and only solution; instead, all the possibilities with their advantages and disadvantages should be considered.

This pamphlet has been compiled with the wish to show the plurality of perspectives and give an idea of what lies behind the thoughts of the specialists of different fields. Even if they agree on the content of changes – a good example here is the first house of the publication, where many think that the window panes and/or skirting boards and the weatherboarding should be painted –, they voice different opinions as to the

reasons why it should be done. *Maris Mändel* approaches the problem from the perspective of typicality related to art history; *Jaak Kõiva* refers to an integrated general impression; and architect *Mart Keskküla* to his personal preferences.

One should certainly not forget that the specialists interviewed are also human beings with their own taste, opinions and sympathies. But the argumentativeness of these opinions is also of importance, as is the general comprehension of the aim to renovate buildings. For example, architect *Mikk Mutso* is of the opinion that the reconstruction of a building is a constant process and the final result is never achieved; *Jaak Kõiva* as an engineer, on the other hand, would like to complete all of the renovation work as an integrated solution; heritage conservation worker *Silja Kõnsa* highlights authentic details, the preservation of which keeps the integral value of the building. Each opinion can reveal an extra aspect of the building, which has perhaps been previously overlooked. Thus, one should not look for conflicts in a difference of opinions, to start fighting to find the truth; instead, we should seek for different perspectives, as each of them adds something to the value of a building.



*Old Kihnu
farmhouse*

REPLACING WINDOWS AND ROOFS

The family decided that the roof material was not important, but it should be red. A stone roof was too heavy and was thus excluded, and they did not dare to use sheet metal roofing, as there were many metal thieves around at the time. They chose bitumen corrugated sheet, whose advantages are a favourable price and easy installation. In the future, the owners have the certain wish of installing a shingle roof again. During roof replacement works, organised in the form of a working bee, rafters were adjusted and the ridge was made straighter as well. The wall pole in the threshing barn had to be replaced as well in order to do that.

With the hopes of fixing the existing windows, the house owner participated in a course on window restoration. Nevertheless, it appeared that frames and jambs that had not been painted for a long time were in a very poor condition in case of several windows. A screw driver could

literally be pushed through the timber. It was wiser to replace the windows entirely. The lesson learned: window frames and jambs should be painted for maintenance at least every 5–7 years.

As plastic windows were rejected, the family decided to order new wooden windows on the example of the currently existing ones in order to preserve the windows' outer shape. They could not find a craftsman in Tallinn or the vicinity thereof, as no one agreed to make a jamb that wide. In addition, it was recommended to make the pane division of the windows simpler. The craftsman was finally found from Jõgeva County. The jambs were connected with sticks and the heating improved with caulk. The gaps between logs were also caulked. Replacing the windows also entailed sealing the logs below the windows. The windows have been oiled by now and will be painted after painting the weatherboarding.

COMMENTS ON THE ROOF

"I think that cement board is such a popular material in Estonian rural architecture that it could be definitely considered traditional. What is a traditional? If something has been used for over fifty years, then this is already a tradition. /.../ I like the red roof considerably less than the grey version. Most of the cement board that we see is grey. It seems to me that cement board does not clash that much, because when it ages, its colour is quite similar to a wooden roof. Looking from a distance, it is not visually disturbing. /.../ This is certainly not the best roofing solution, but I cannot see anything awful here either.

Besides, roofing is a very functional thing: it has to be waterproof. Its appearance is not that important. The material used here is cheaper than a roof appropriate for the era."
Maris Mändel

"A good cement board roof can last longer than a roof made of chippings. It is easier to make mistakes with chippings than with cement board. /.../ Well, it might not be aligned well and the water might not run off it correctly. Even the question of how many chips do you dare to discard. /.../ When you are installing a roof for the first time, you



1938

Before



After

cannot always see that there are 10% more chips than needed. And then you can put substandard chips on the roof.”

Targo Kalamees

“I think that using bitumen corrugated sheet roofing helped to preserve this building. If the owner cannot or does not want to restore a roof’s original material, then it is better to install a waterproof roof of some other

material than to leave the building to decay. This is of primary importance in case of a roof. The other thing is that you can always replace bitumen corrugated sheet for the original material. Each one of us certainly understands that this is not an old authentic roof but new material has been used so as to preserve the building. I like that the shape of the original roof has been maintained.”

Silja Konsa

COMMENTS ON THE WINDOWS

“I think that if the owner was right to replace the windows. The new window copies the old one exactly. /.../ This is, of course, a question of taste, but if the window was originally painted, then the owner should also paint it now. However, there is always time to paint the windows later.” *Mart Keskküla*

“The division of window panes is nice. /.../ I do not very much like the use of stained wood and nothing else. This seems to be an atypical use of material. I would have preferred colour, especially in case of skirting boards. Mainly because then the window would match the door better. Of course, in very old times, the windows of rural houses were not painted, but these windows seem like they come from an era when they were already painted. At the moment they seem a bit alien.” *Maris Mändel*

“I did not even notice that the windows had been replaced. On the first and second picture

the windows are white; on the third they are wood-coloured. The colour seemed to have been scraped off. Actually, you cannot tell from such a small picture. You cannot see whether the window sills have been installed as they should be.” *Mikk Mutso*

“The door and the windows conflict each other. In a way, it is nice. One should do nice things. The windows are nice; the door is nice. However, the door is urban, while the rustic nature of the windows is almost emphasised. Such a division of frame, in my opinion, needs to be painted.” *Riin Alatalu*

“Windows and doors are the eyes and mouth of the house’s facade. In that case, they could be highlighted a bit more, either with a brighter (white) colour or with good finishing. Nowadays, it is customary to choose a door that opens outwards, both for fire safety rules and to keep out thieves.” *Jaak Kõiva*



“I think the bush next to the house is a problem. All the water that runs down the roof falls on the bush. Some of it goes outward, some inward and the area behind the bush is definitely damp. This is a technical problem. If you want to conceal the side of the house facing the street with a bush of sorts, then you should plant it away from the house, leaving space in between. /.../ There has to be a rain gutter as well.” *Targo Kalamees*

“Considering its volume, the building is appropriate for the village landscape, but the colour of the roof and windows is unsuitable. And at the same time the timber cladding has been left unpainted. This is disturbing. If you start, complete it as well. If you want to renovate, then renovate everything, but not so that it was obvious. Go ahead and fix something up, but do not paint it neon green.” *Jaak Kõiva*

“This house is currently semi-finished, like most houses generally are. Here is a picture of the finished house – in the year 1938. This could be a picture from a modern sleek magazine, when a building has been just finished. In reality, such a situation can only be enjoyed for a short period of time. During the life of a (rural) house, something is incomplete most of the time. Most of the time you are living in a mess. For some reason, a disproportionate amount of attention is paid to the moment of completion. But in fact it is just as interesting to see how things function for the rest of the time.” *Mikk Mutso*

“If a person already has such a valuable building, then the value has to be maintained on the level of detail as well. Actually, details are the very things that give value to a building.” *Silja Kõnsa*

REPLACING THE ROOF AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A DORMER

The garden kitchen and the barn of chests, that is, granary, located in Muhu and representing the so-called Muhu classicism, were built in 1911–1912 on the initiative of the house owner. Based on oral history, it is known that all the black iron stone blocks on the front side, the white dolomite bounding blocks and of the doors and windows and door as well as the corner blocks (the chimney pipe details probably as well) had been cut out in front of the threshing barn furnace during one winter. By now, it has been established that the iron stone blocks of the front side are from the same stone.

Characteristic of the area, the roof was covered with reed, which lasted for nearly 60 years. The cement board typical of the Soviet times lasted for the next 40 years.

Almost 100 years after the completion of the outdoor kitchen it was decided to use a thatch roof again. The craftsmen were local men from Muhu.

The men constructing the roof followed the mathematic precision and strict logic of their forefathers with the utmost respect. During renovation work, 100 mm layer of mineral wool was added between the rafters and a dormer was constructed on the back side of the building. The added “eye” has several functions: to light the indoors with the evening sun, provide air to the staircase and laundry room, arrange better air exchange and welcome the neighbours.

Shaping the ridge with boarding is an old rediscovered method, although the building had originally been brushed with reed and wooden rods.

COMMENTS

“What kind of a roof did the house have originally? A stone roof could also have suited this house. It lasts several times longer than a thatch roof. The ridge solution on this roof is very good. The boards have been installed vertically, an attempt has been made to imitate the installation of ridge rods. Such a roof ridge of boards gives a more concrete look to the house.” *Jaak Kõiva*

“The dormer here is tasteful. /.../ This is a tough nut to crack in case of houses like these, if you want to start using a large space below the roof – it is dark in the middle. How do you bring light there, making sure that the solution matches the overall approach of the house? In that case it is wise to look at the

particular situation on spot; I cannot point out one rule of thumb. /.../ The proportions suit this house: the window is small and matches the outside measurements of the house. I am sure the owners may have wanted a bigger window, as this one does not let enough light inside. On the other hand, a small dormer makes the room cosier. Something to be considered. And the edge ridges have windows too.” *Mikk Mutso*

“I am disturbed by the thatch roof on this house. /.../ A board roof would have suited it much better. In my opinion, there is some contradiction here: a fairytale house has been made. /.../ The house of Hansel and Gretel. Typical icing colour: green and pink.”

Riin Alatalu



Before



Working
process



After

INTERIOR FINISHING

Everything began because the floors were severely damaged by brown rot and had to be replaced. Then it was decided to do all the other “dirty” works as well. All layers of wallpaper and paperboard were removed from the floors, nails were pulled out and the walls were cleaned. The ceiling also had several layers of wallpaper, which were impossible to remove completely. The ceiling was therefore covered with osiery of wicker twigs.

Putting the stove, heated wall and chimney into order was a more taxing task. The starting point was to replace the roasting oven and stove door. It soon became clear

that a number of stones had to be replaced. Stones also had to be replaced in the heated wall, which was cleaned from old lime plaster at first. In order to make the surface smoother, the stove was rendered with red clay plaster, which went well together with the heated wall and the base of the chimney.

Approximately 10–15 cm of old soil was carted off below the floor and replaced with light gravel. Some of the bottom logs also had to be sealed. Floor boards were ordered from the local sawmill. The floors were polished and oiled.

COMMENTS

“Here is how I see the interior: if it is not a monument, then no heritage conservation requirements should be established at all. This is the residents’ private space. If these solutions do not harm the building technically, then having wallpaper or exposed logs is purely a matter of taste. Wallpaper keeps heat in better and also acts keeps wind out. Whether the floor has been exposed or painted is again a matter of taste. I personally do not like it if too much of the wood surface has been exposed. I associate it with a sauna front room from the 1980s and the 1990s, but this is purely a personal dislike.”

Maris Mändel

“I like it. I like the entire approach: do as little as needed. Here is a cupboard with some of the paint left on, which creates interesting surfaces. I personally like it. And the same

with the rubber [above the stove]. They have not overdone anything. Some of the paint has been left on. So what if everything did not come off. /.../ Not everyone might like this, though.” *Mikk Mutso*

About exposing the log surface: “Yes, why not. If you like that kind of a thing, it is nice. If you want a wooden floor, wall and ceiling, then go ahead. This picture does not show us the surroundings. Perhaps some of the walls are white or something, so that it is not too wooden: some like white surfaces too. This house should be lived in during the winter – I myself have lived in such a wooden house in winter – during long dark nights you want to see white surfaces to direct light onto. To dispel the absolute darkness. /.../ The lightness can be then created with white curtains or white furniture.” *Mikk Mutso*



Before



After



“Oh, is this wicker twig on the ceiling? This is practical and smart, too. I have tried to burnish a ceiling like that and eventually just gave up. This is awful work. /.../ I had a special mask on with dust filters, but somehow the dust still penetrated it. It is uncomfortable to burnish the ceiling where it is. The ceiling should be taken down and cleaned then. Otherwise, this is one of the most miserable tasks of all. Perhaps some people like it – I do not. Wicker twigs are a particularly good trick of escaping the cleaning of the ceiling while preserving the impression of wood.”

Mikk Mutso

“Wicker twigs are an interesting solution. It definitely collects a lot of dust: it will be a problem for those with allergies.” *Jaak Kõiva*

“That kind of an interior finish has mostly been opted for in summer homes, much less in indigenous farmhouses where people live all year round. If you live in an overly polished euro-environment in the city, then in the countryside, you would like to see something quite different, something authentic and ancient – whatever you means by it. On the other hand, this probably highlights the building’s history and idiosyncrasy quite well. If it has been done properly, like in this picture, then the effect is pleasant.”

Heiki Pärdi

“Following from the original, the paperboard could of course be glued back, add new board and clean wallpaper. However, it is a matter of taste, too. /.../ The question is whether the owner wants to live like his great-grandmother or do things his own way.” *Riin Alatalu*

“If the interior walls have been covered with plaster or plywood and you expose the logs, more wind will definitely penetrate the wall between the logs.” *Targo Kalamees*

“This is a summer house, right? I find this [exposing logs] to be a fine solution. He has exposed the part of the logs worth looking at. Actually, in old times, the wall was mostly covered with cardboard and wallpaper in order to keep the heat in. If this is a summer house, then this solution is actually nice. Here we have a curtain rod from the Soviet times; this is a chair from the time of the first Republic of Estonia... It is quite nice to look at. He has mixed all these time periods together and the result is quite lovely. These items tell us more about the house than new things could.” *Ly Renter*



RENOVATING THE HOUSE

The aim of renovating this threshing building was to create a building that could be used all year round: a home. The owners themselves had few wishes and the architect was given a lot of freedom. This mainly due to the fact that the owners had lived in a flat and simply could not think of many things. The following work was done by construction workers.

Inside, the room plan was slightly altered; the attic was put into use and the toilet and bathroom were installed inside. The threshing barn is also in active use: the pantry and the half-staircase of the first floor were located here.

The house was insulated from the inside; outside, only a wind protection slab has

been installed under the boarding. Non-planed boards were used for weatherboarding and yellow soil paint for colouring. New windows were installed level with the outer cladding. A dormer was built for the rooms on the first floor on the building's back side so as to let more light in.

The appearance of the front side has changed little, in fact, but the hallway of silicate stones built in the Soviet times was demolished. The new chip roof was of the greatest changes influencing the external appearance of the building.

The house will be altered and renovated in the future depending on the existing need and possibilities. According to the family, it "is just a simple home to enjoy peace and the process of living in a farmhouse".

COMMENTS

"In a way I even like it. /.../ Basically, they have tried to find a solution that would be appropriate considering the essence of the place. Which probably does not mean that it should be very old, although the methods are: chip roof, vertical boarding. The volume is just right. /.../ I would rather consider it a new structure. In my opinion, this is certainly not a house that would disrupt the milieu of the countryside. /.../ Looking at this house, it is completely impossible to say when it was built. /.../ All the elements have been borrowed from traditional architecture and put together in a new way." *Maris Mändel*

About the skylight: "It depends on the kind of authenticity that you are after. Even if you try to restore your house and make it look like nothing has changed in a hundred years,

then the skylight is obviously too much. But if you value consistency, the tradition of living in the countryside as such, then the skylight can be seen as a purely functional element: you can start using the attic space below the roof." *Maris Mändel*

"The fact that it is the same house is quite surprising. It has become a sort of a manor house, but why not. The dormer has been built where a window was needed to let in light and expand the view. Although this is not very widespread, that solution does exist in our farmhouse architecture. First, I would look around the area, whether a particular idiosyncrasy has been developed and how does it look like. Then you should consider if and what to take over from this solution. Or, instead, what to conflict. Or develop further



Before



After

... Whatever the owner is interested in. We should not forget that everyone's home can be a piece of art. I like the idea of the artist Kaido Ole that each household can be viewed as an exhibition, where the preferences and tastes of the family are expressed. A house also represents the things that the family has tried to hide or conceal. Actually, with such an approach we constantly wonder about the overall role of the architect. Perhaps to bring these topics to the owners' attention, to systematise, look closely at the details and the big picture, introduce possibilities and earlier experiences. But the final decision has to be made by the owner. And it is interesting if there is less prejudice and more knowledge, when the participants have the courage to approach the process in an open way."

Mikk Mutso

"In my opinion, they have slightly overdone it. I would have not done the roof step or would have really only done a straight half-hip, not a step like this. This option is neither here nor there: first, there is a small gable, then the hip, and then again a larger gable. A three-step attribute. I find it a little disturbing. In other respects, I do not find that they have treated old architecture poorly."

Heiki Pärdi

"The attic of a threshing barn has never been used like this; architecturally there have never been such structures with a protruding profile either. This motif is foreign to barns. /.../ The dormer is too big considering the proportions of the building."

Silja Konsa

"The wishes of the people living there, who own and need the house are the most important. We can think what we like and it does not matter to them. Rightfully so. I do not condemn them for making alterations like these."

Heiki Pärdi

"They should cut down the tree by the entrance, as it hides the house's exterior in the summer. The extension of the dormer seems quite interesting. This way, a lot of space and light has been created. It does not give me the impression of a threshing barn anymore, though."

Jaak Kõiva

"A manor has been built instead of a threshing barn. /.../ Based on this picture, I think that it is not bad: they have wanted to gain more space and have achieved it. The proportions are correct. It is an extensive development but let it be."

Riin Alatalu

"A nice solution. If the threshing barn was taken away, I would develop it into a mansion. But in this situation they have overdone it. A dormer of that size was built for houses constructed in the 20th century: mansions. /.../ The half-hip and the dormer do contradict each another now."

Mart Keskküla



COMPLETE RENOVATION

At first, the family planned to renovate the inside of the house alone. When the walls were exposed it became clear that they could not stop there: the logs were in a poor state. Therefore, the whole house had to be renovated entirely, from the foundation to the roof.

The fact that the house had not been maintained very well was both a misfortune and a fortune. Misfortune because a lot had to be changed and done. Fortune because the Soviet time with its cement, ash blocks and plastic passed this house by. The aim was to renovate the house as environmentally friendly as possible and restore it to a condition that would resemble the original as closely as possible. Expanded polystyrene and thermal foam were eliminated. The gaps between logs were sealed with flax felt; the heat insulation of the house itself was done with rock wool. By now, the limestone wall has also been jointed on the outside.

When the logs were replaced it became clear that the windows needed to be replaced as well. Some of them had been made in the Soviet times and wind blew straight through them. Thus it was decided to replace all windows for new ones with better heat insulation.

The small windows of the house and the threshing barn were ordered from Viljandi County based on the original ones. The result – wooden double windows, whose inner side was made of a double thermo-selective insulated glazed unit. The owners were adamant to use forged corners. Instead of the threshing barn's doors they chose large windows from Viking Window, as they are planning to build a fireplace room in the threshing barn. The windows selected are wooden windows with a triple thermo-selective insulated glazed unit.

The majority of the rafters were in a good state and the ridge was also almost straightened. Cement board and metal sheet were eliminated immediately when it came to the choice of roofing material. Stone and wood remained. Although the owners were a little worried about wood as roofing material (maintenance and durability), triple wood shingles were chosen.

The family believes that if they were to do it again, then they would perhaps consider more single-glazed insulated wooden windows instead of double-glazed windows, and would prefer a maintenance-free stone roof.



Before

COMMENTS

“In terms of style, forged corners on this type of window look a bit alien. If the division of the windows is characteristic of the Soviet times, then why would they choose these? There is at least a century between the division of the window panes and the corners. In case of such a house type the impression it gives me is somehow especially foreign. /.../ You can have old-looking corners but they should be the colour of the frame. /.../ Strong contrasts in paint, skirting boards emphasised with black – this is not a typical solution. They should have chosen slightly milder tones; such a strong contrast is too much.” *Maris Mändel*

About the threshing barn gates: “This is a modern preference. The division of window panes is too little in my opinion, but it is totally reasonable to use the existing opening, where large doors were located, in order to let in light. Life changes, no one needs threshing gates anymore; light is however desperately needed inside. /.../ At the moment, these sides leave it a bit bare, architecturally speaking.

They could have chosen large glass surfaces and put shutters next to them: this creates the impression of having open gates. /.../ Their main mistake is too many decorations.”

Maris Mändel

“The window has been left on the background. The main trait of a wooden house is that the window and the facade are level with each other. In case of a stone house the window is set about 10 cm inside the wall. /.../ When the windows were replaced here, they should have lifted them outward. When extra insulation was installed, the surface of the window and the insulation should have been on the same level. Otherwise a thermal bridge is created in the corner.” *Mart Keskküla*

“The fact that daylight is brought inside the house is nice. In this case there should indeed be a door fully made of glass: two-sided, without any panes. In addition, a log door could be added. It could be closed whenever the family leaves and in addition, it would give the impression of threshing barn gates.”

Jaak Kõiva

After



Before



About threshing barn gates: “This has been done before. No one does threshing or winnowing anymore. Why should these large threshing barn gates be closed, or made of stuffy logs, if they can be also used as an opening for light. This does not disturb me. This is a contemporary threshing barn with a changed function. A good solution, I think.”

Heiki Pärdi

”The approach here has been to straighten everything out completely. Straightened walls and straightened openings. I think that in case of an older house this has required certain effort. I personally do not represent the school of achieving total order in old houses. However, if they so wish, why not: the house stands, is warm and usable. Indeed, with present-day materials – such as wind protection slabs or rock wool – the base has to be right first. If you use ecological materials such as reed or rendering, then you do not need to make it all level and can achieve rounder forms.” *Mikk Mutso*

“I would be interested in knowing whether they intend to install gates there. I do not know what kind of a house this is. Do they live there all year round? But if they leave for longer periods of time, then the gates could be there for safety. This would also be an original detail, which lends idiosyncrasy. The

composition of diagonals and bows differs regionally. /.../ Maybe this does not match the general direction, but it would still balance the innovations made. The preserved original details, which do not crumble into pieces as soon as you touch them, could be kept and put into use somewhere.” *Mikk Mutso*

”Approaching the windows should be contemplated. Whether it would be wiser to try to reconstruct a certain era or choose a composition with details from different eras. Both are possible. Some like this, others that. It depends on the material available. If it is a house where details from different eras can be seen, a different approach could be considered; they should not try to strive towards a specific year. They should use what the house has to offer. /.../ Sometimes it is a pity if there are materials from different ages and then the owner tries to restore one certain era. In my opinion, these are useless efforts.” *Mikk Mutso*

“The boarding is stylish; it was very widespread around the change of the previous century. A two-sided mixture of vertical and horizontal boarding was very modern then. /.../ They have probably drawn inspiration from old houses. This was very much done in mansions – in separate houses. This has been also done in case of threshing barns, although

After



to a lesser extent. I do not see why they could not have used two-part boarding. /.../ The colour is very good in my mind. Natural soft colours; nothing bright or unnatural. It also matches the roof, the surrounding nature and limestone well. Very stylishly done.” *Heiki Pärdi*

”A based with vertical boarding has appeared here; it was not there originally. The owner has tried to decorate the building according to his own taste. /.../ Perhaps he could have discussed the building with an expert in order to achieve an even better result.” *Silja Konsa*

”If they are going to install a new roof anyway, then it would be better for the house’s appearance, but also as a technical solution, to make it wider by the volume of the insulation, so that the proportions would remain the same. So that the eaves would not become shorter due to this.” *Riin Alatalu*

”Why is it important to bring the windows onto the exterior surface? In order to preserve the architectural line. /.../ Technically speaking, however, it is not very good that the new window is level with the boarding; the window remains between the layer of boarding and air, where water drips down, and a thermal bridge is created as well. These old window jambs are 15 cm wide. New

windows often have a three-layered insulated glazed unit in one frame and the jamb is 8 cm wide. In that case it would be good if the wind protection slab ran onto the jamb. The wind protection slab makes sure that the window is included in the insulation. Such a solution is the best. A solution in case of which the jamb is level with the wind protection slab is also satisfactory. The worst technical solution would be one where the jamb was level with the boarding, that is, the house’s exterior surface. Then, a 3–4 cm space [boarding and air space before the wind protection slab] is left immediately behind the boarding, and only then does the insulation layer start. The part of the jamb that remains outside the insulation forms a thermal bridge.” *Targo Kalamees*

”Yes, the limestone wall has been cleaned. /.../ The spaces between joints are too deep; they should be more even. This is also a technical tip. If they remain too deep, then they become rain water locks. /.../ In a traditional wall, the joints are only a few millimetres deep, nearly on the same level with the stones.” *Silja Konsa*

”Such a house has never had a soffit. These roofs used to have an exposed rafter tip and then the eaves; rafter tips were visible. This is a contemporary solution. It is not characteristic either.” *Mart Keskküla*

CONSTRUCTION OF THE FOUNDATION

This threshing barn did not have a proper foundation. Typically of old rural houses, larger field stones had been placed in the corners and loose limestone into the gaps. As the ground had risen and the house had become lower, the bottom row of logs on the northern side touched the ground. Obviously, something had to be done; there was nothing to be kept or used from the old foundation.

The specific solution was proposed by the construction workers: the perimeter of the entire house was dug open and a concrete

foundation was cast below. This should be a lifetime solution: it will not sink; no rodents can creep inside etc. It seemed that if it had to be done, the solution should last, so that the owners would not have to regret or redo it later. However, the entire foundation is below ground, so that the concrete, which clashes with the appearance of the house, remains invisible. The base, which was done traditionally as it was before, is visible: it was constructed from the stones on site. To her great joy, the stones were gathered from the neighbour's field.

COMMENTS

“It is good to use local materials and the methods used at the time when the house was constructed. There was probably no hydro-isolation though; it would be wise to use it now. At that time, during the construction of the house, the owners could use silver bark, but it can also be used nowadays, if you can find it. Silver bark is very good hydro-isolation. /.../ If there is no rush and you want to enjoy the work, consider silver bark. /.../ It is not wise to rush at all when it comes to log houses; you should take it easy. First study the house from top to bottom and make its peculiarities clear to yourself. Look at neighbouring houses as well: the local peculiarities (if there are any) should be preserved.” *Mikk Mutso*

“The limestone base is certainly better than a dull all-concrete base. If it is made of local stone and characteristic of the area, then the owners would be correct in repairing the foundation so that it matched the old

tradition nicely.” *Heiki Pärdi*

“In this particular case, the monolithic nature of the foundation is an advantage of casting it. A limestone part, which gives the impression that the foundation is entirely made of limestone, has been laid on the monolithic concrete, so that the house would preserve its historic value. Technically speaking, it can be seen that a hydro belt has also been used. It is very important to use it to prevent temperature differences or moisture from penetrating the wood.” *Jaak Kõiva*

“Nowadays, I would not choose a full limestone basement without insulation. If the floor remains here, on the same height with the base, then the floor by the external wall becomes very cold because of a thermal bridge above the limestone base. If the floor is built up, on the height of the first or the second log, then thermal problems are less significant, but it may happen that the floors

in the building need to be raised. /.../ If I was to cast it I would have concrete-insulation-concrete in the entire foundation and then I would finish it from the outside depending on the need.” *Targo Kalamees*

“There was actually nothing else to do: the logs were rotten and the ground had risen. A contemporary solution: the house has been raised and the logs replaced. This limestone is deceiving. As such, it is nice that the concrete is not exposed. The current solution is better suited. It would not have been reasonable to use the solution they used in the olden times – a house perched on four stones.” *Ly Renter*

Concrete



Limestone

IN CONCLUSION

Every farmstead can be looked at from a countless number of perspectives: the inner climate, the thermal aspect, the durability of materials, history, aesthetics, ethnology, heritage conservation, emotional values etc.

Based on these perspectives, different practices, approaches and recommendations are developed to address the same issues in different languages: sometimes they are oriented at different aims, sometimes they even conflict with each other. Often, a representative of clearly developed preferences and aims fails to understand other opinions – they remain alien to him. Construction heritage experts thus often experience difficulties in understanding the opinions of the user, owner and resident of a building. The experts are supported by rational arguments and long-term experience, which is certainly in their favour, but the decisions on the development, changes and future of a building have to be made by the owner.

The plurality of opinions should not mean contradictions but rather the possibility to highlight the multitude of the different sides and nuances of one building. Each person with his or her professional knowledge, experience and skills opens new aspects in

a house, creating a more coherent picture for the owner. Therefore, it would be unwise to divide the values of a building as “right” or “wrong”. Instead, they should be understood as right and/or wrong for somebody, based on some kind of standpoint, in a particular context, and at a particular moment.

The comments in this publication should be regarded as recommendations, as the solutions used can be very dissimilar. Present-day technologies are thriving and improving, but there has not yet been enough time to implement them and compare the results. It should not be forgotten that the possibilities and needs of house owners differ considerably. It is clear that each old house should be viewed separately and that there can never be single solutions appropriate for all cases.

The purpose of this pamphlet was to try and explain some of the grounds for assessing values on the basis of specific examples, to show the plurality of assessments and to introduce renovation solutions based on them. Hopefully, we were able to give some guidelines for house owners who need to start renovating their property.

Onwards and upwards!

The Values
in an Old Rural House
2013