

Article

## Towards Liveability in Historic Centres: Challenges and Enablers of Transformation in Two Latvian Towns

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### Abstract

This article describes two Latvian towns, Cēsis and Bauska, which have medieval origins and noticeable layers of subsequent historic periods. Both of their town centres have historic heritage protection status and a complex mixture of values, needs, and opportunities for the locals and visitors. The towns have recently had some physical improvements implemented in their public spaces, with key differences in the interplay between local governments and stakeholders. The Cēsis case was a municipality-initiated and public-led intervention to build awareness. The Bauska case was mainly a plea from active inhabitants that was only partially realised by the municipality, with limited support. In both cases, the introduced changes tackled some accumulated challenges, such as insufficient walkability, degraded public space, and car-centric town centres, but they also provoked discussions about the quality of the achievements, which raised questions about collaboration culture and practice between stakeholders. This study evaluates the interventions initiated by the municipality and the initiatives by nongovernmental organisations from the point of view of the tools applied and from the point of view of the civil process. This research contributes to discussions about the challenges of different approaches in spatial planning and provides recommendations about possible integrated planning solutions, as well as about the formation of the civil process.

### Keywords

historic centres; Latvia; liveability; local governance; participation; spatial planning

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The small towns of Latvia and their historic urban centres, like many other places, are undergoing a multitude of changes and challenges that local governments and inhabitants must address. Similarities between small towns, especially those with historic centres, can be found in the present trend where historic houses, squares, and former high streets are deteriorating under the effect of competition with other places such as suburbs or other towns. At the same time, due to the complex entanglement of the social, economic, and environmental aspects of each individual town—varied local

conditions and changing social forces—spatial planners are forced to develop and apply tailor-made, innovative, and participatory approaches (Evans et al., 2021; Gale, 2004; Scholl & de Kraker, 2021; Zetti, 2010) in order to counteract the conditions. In this context, an important starting point is the recognition of historic urban landscapes as vaults of different tangible and intangible values (Vehbi & Hoskara, 2009; Wang et al., 2018) and great development assets (Gale, 2004; Heath et al., 1996). The next important component is the liveliness and diversity of the social fabric, comprised mainly of people for whom the historic centre is a place of everyday life—a place to live, work, access services, and meet others.

This research examines two small Latvian towns, Cēsis and Bauska, which have historic medieval centres. The historic centres of both towns formed over the centuries as organic and functional urban spaces. In the period after the Second World War, these territories were defined as architecturally significant and protectable. During the period of Soviet rule, they were identified as areas with historic heritage protection status, and regeneration projects were developed but not realised. In the last two to three decades, the development of these historic centres was determined by so-called territorial plans covering the town as a whole, determining land use and building rules. The historic centres were identified as special, valuable territories both because of their urban structure and the presence of cultural and historic heritage elements. The towns are similar in scale, having been regional administrative centres for several decades. This meant that, especially during the Soviet era, the administrative service facilities were located in these towns and, in general, they were the biggest recipients of investment. The fact that the historical centre of Cēsis was also developed as an administrative core was of great importance, while the old town of Bauska was not.

The urban patterns of both towns have experienced changes in the last two decades. In the case of Cēsis, these are characterised by improvements in functionality, value preservation, and quality of the urban environment; in the case of Bauska, a similar trend has not been observed, and the historic centre is still a kind of quiet “inner island” of the town. In this research, we seek answers to why this has happened and what the main factors influencing these contemporary transformations are. By analysing the development processes, we come across different approaches that are implemented in the two towns. In Cēsis, the municipality is a main driver of development, while actual demand and attempts for the revival of the historic centre are mainly initiated by NGOs in Bauska, and the municipality has realised only a few distinct projects. Therefore, the main focus of this study is to evaluate the interventions initiated by the municipality and the initiatives of the NGOs with regard to the tools applied and the civil process.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

For a long time, the development of urban historic centres had focused mainly on the preservation of their values (Hurley, 2010). As a result, the practice of spatial planning in Latvia mainly focused on determining restrictions, paying little attention to the vibrancy of the historic centres, public participation, and the well-being of users. Changes in the urban environment were implemented mainly through distinct and small infrastructure projects.

Recently, there have been discussions in Latvia about the development of valuable urban structures in connection with the need for modernisation, which would largely take into account the needs of local community

life. Through accumulated experience, groups of stakeholders (e.g., entrepreneurs, residents, representatives of the administration, researchers, and activists) cooperate with each other more and more often, initiating projects and ideas for the development of the historic urban environment. A key issue in the transformation of historic centres is the move from a restrictive physical planning approach to a community-strengthening approach involving participatory activities and the promotion of urban environment changes as a tool for community activation. The development of historic centres is possible in the context of contemporary trends of urban transformation, with requirements determined by technological solutions, increasing differences in the needs of social groups, as well as changing public sector and management topics—for example, growing interest in innovation and urban liveability (Couch et al., 2003; Munthe-Kaas, 2015, 2017).

Over time, the responsibility for improving the quality of the urban environment has changed. This role was initially assumed by organisations and activists, but now it has become an essential role of the local government (Healey, 2010). In the case of Latvia, it has been the other way around; however, today there is a search for balance, where civic initiatives play an increasingly important role. The urban transformation narrative is based on the possibility of adapting and creating conditions that enable and promote sustainability, the resilience of the urban environment, and quality of life in the cooperation between local governments and social groups (Couch et al., 2003; Ellery & Ellery, 2019; Hölscher et al., 2020; Roberts & Sykes, 2000; Rossi, 2004; Syrett & North, 2008).

New innovative governance approaches are constantly emerging around the world to carry out urban transformation and promote sustainable change dynamics (Couch et al., 2003; Evans et al., 2021; Lever, 2005). In this context, the contemporary development of urban historic centres is of special importance (Chahardowli et al., 2020; Fabbicatti & Biancamano, 2019; Fekete et al., 2021; Ferretti, 2015; Fouseki & Nicolau, 2018; van Oers, 2007). It is clear that civic initiatives are supported in all forms, and the use of traditional techniques in urban planning in Latvia has continued. In planning the development of small towns, new approaches and tools must be sought. One possibility involves experimentation and interventions in the urban environment (Eneqvist & Karvonen, 2021). In recent years, they have increasingly been seen as a working tool of the local government or as a way to achieve more dynamic changes in the urban environment (Evans et al., 2021; Healey, 2010; Munthe-Kaas, 2015; Scholl & de Kraker, 2021; Sehested, 2009; Wanner et al., 2021), which responds to the demand of the population. The intervention approach means that activities are directed by the municipality along with the creation of new types of interactions with civil society and its activities.

Cities are actively using the intervention approach—for example, Copenhagen carried out a large-scale

project called “Create Your City” (Munthe-Kaas, 2015). Tērbatas Street was closed to automotive traffic in the historic centre of Riga to test its possibility of becoming a pedestrian street in the future (“Mēnesi transportlīdzekļiem plāno slēgt Tērbatas ielu,” 2020), while Vabaduse Avenue was closed for a month in the city of Tartu (Tartu City Government, 2020) with exactly the same goal—to create an intervention that shows the city and its inhabitants the possibilities for increasing liveliness and the diversity of activities. In Cēsis, an experimental approach and municipal interventions were implemented in the town’s historic centre as a tool for promoting changes in the urban environment, taking into account the possibility of introducing innovations that respond to the challenges of the current situation in the local and global context through targeted transformation. This was done both by involving citizens in the experimentation process and by using tools available to the municipality. Estonia also targeted the reconstruction of central squares in a dozen small towns (Vellevoog, n.d.). The interventions enhanced Estonian landscapes, including nature, architecture, and public space. The interventions implemented acknowledged the decline of small towns but also the potential to boost the rebirth of town centres with the redesign of public spaces (Printsmann et al., 2019).

The development of historic centres is always unique and closely related to the national and local context. According to experience and conceptual vision, there are two further lines of development: the strengthening of civic activities and interventions with fragmentary effects and the elaboration and implementation of comprehensive strategies. The cases of Cēsis and Bauska reinforce the question of how to choose the best solutions and approaches.

### 3. Methods

Our path towards understanding the potential and limitations of approaches to realise socially inclusive planning for historic centres is captured in qualitative and explorative case studies of two towns. The empirical data gathered for this article consist of town structure analysis, on-site observations, and semi-structured interviews.

#### 3.1. Town Structure Analyses

For both towns, the historic development of their spatial structure was analysed through documents and site visits in order to understand the existing urban landscape of the historic centres and the adjacent parts of the towns. These materials were complemented with careful examination of articles from local resources (newspapers, websites) and discussions in social media for broader context on the transformations and events taking place, as well as on the public opinion accompanying these processes. Furthermore, we analysed local interventions,

their results, and the role of both local governments and civil society as participants in the process.

#### 3.2. Site Visits

Several site visits were organised in 2020 and 2021 to observe how the public and private spaces of the historic centres (streets, parks, courtyards, places of retail, and services) function in daily life and on specially organised occasions. During the site visits, special attention was focused firstly on both old towns as unified ensembles in the urban structure, secondly on the places where the latest interventions had taken place—the reconstructed squares of Līvu, Rožu, Vienības and Rīgas Street in Cēsis, small infrastructure improvement sites, the town hall, and the town hall square in Bauska.

#### 3.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

To obtain in-depth information about the interventions (intended and realised) in both cases, semi-structured interviews were held in remote and face-to-face settings. The interviews consisted of three interrelated blocks of questions: perception and knowledge of historic and current situations in the historic centres (and towns in general), professional and civic involvement of respondents in actions related to the historic centres, and professional and personal outlook on the challenges, needs, and perspectives in the development of historic centres. The interviews were organised with local stakeholders representing different fields—entrepreneurs, NGOs, and representatives from town councils, institutions, and planning and development departments. The interviewees were encouraged to clearly distinguish their personal and professional opinions, as almost all of them are not only relevant professionals (e.g., spatial planners, head of a museum, head of a cultural centre) but are also local inhabitants, and some are involved in NGOs or are owners of local enterprises. Notably, in the case of Cēsis, one of the authors of this article has been working as a spatial development planner in the municipality, and she was the designer and manager of (and participant in) the intervention projects described below.

### 4. Two Towns and Their Paths Toward the Liveability of Their Historic Centres

Cēsis, in the northeast part of Latvia, and Bauska, in the south of Latvia, are both of medieval origin in the Livonian Order period. Both have castle residences as their historic centres, which, through centuries, sometimes gradually and sometimes abruptly, were developed by various events and ruling powers. It is important to note that they were included in the Latvian state’s list of protected cultural monuments as urban ensembles, based on the 1992 law on protection of cultural monuments—Bauska Old Town in 1992 and Cēsis Old Town (a designated territory by the status of historic

cultural heritage protection) in 1998. Due to this, both municipalities developed a set of rather strict development regulations included in the Cēsis County Spatial Plan 2016–2026 and the Bauska County Spatial Plan 2012–2024. The regulations are legally binding for every property owner and include points on the preservation of historic building volumes and restoration of architectural solutions and details (windows, doors, construction parts, etc.). However, without any substantial support from the municipalities, this often causes negligence of historic architectural values by owners and tenants, as well as delays in the development and improvement of the historic centres.

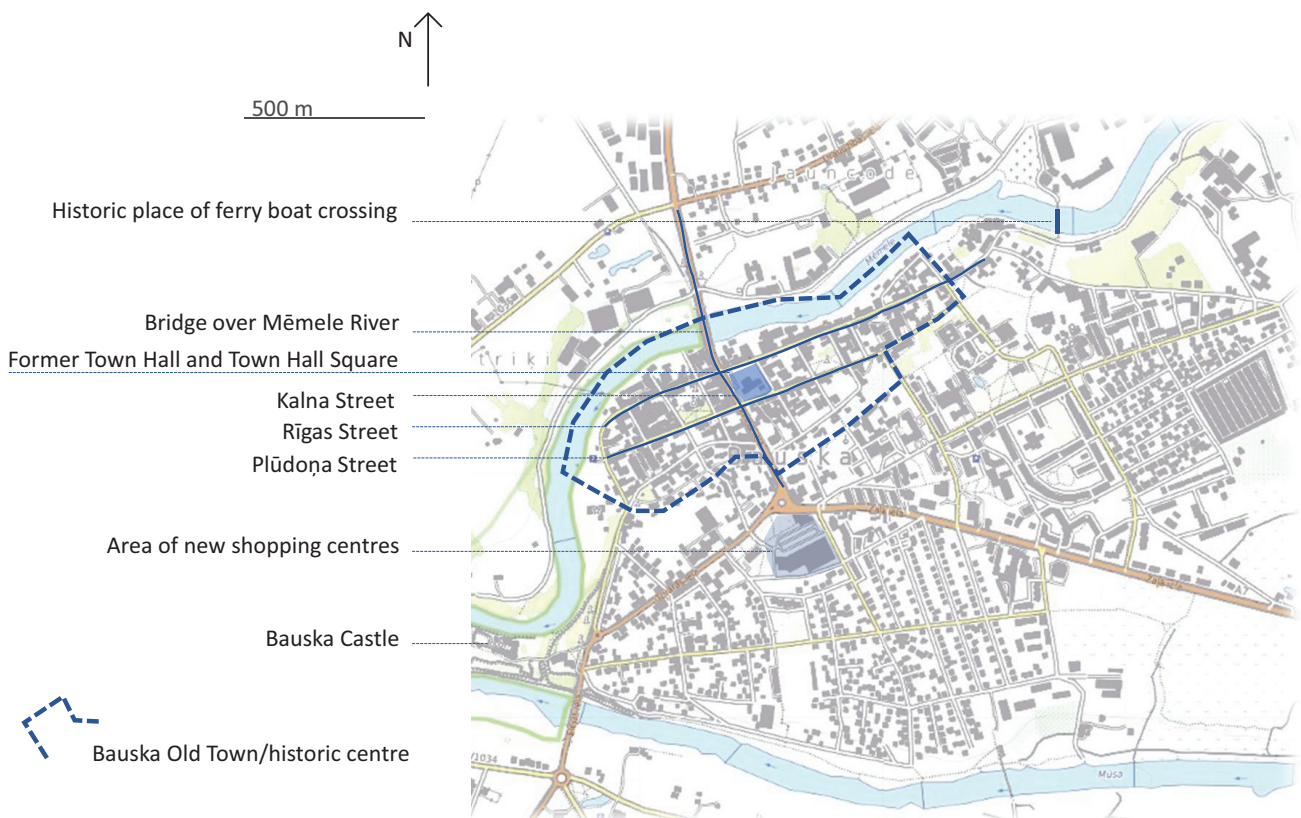
#### 4.1. Bauska Town

Bauska, with a population of 9,755, is situated 70 km from Riga and 20 km from Lithuania. The geographical location of the town on the peninsula made by the confluence of the Mūsa and Mēmele rivers was strategically important, and the Bauska Castle was built in the mid-15th century. Later, in 1609, by receiving town privileges, settlements that accompanied the castle were fixed at the present location of Bauska Old Town. The spatial structure of the Old Town is captured in a grid-type street network and low-rise buildings (see Figure 1). Two main streets, Rīgas Street and Plūdoņa Street, along with many cross streets, were laid down parallel to the Mēmele River. The layout of the Old Town was developed

historically to ensure densely mixed and residential use. The 20th century brought abrupt changes in the town's space and population. Before the Second World War, urban structures spread to the south from the Old Town, where new housing, school, hospital, and other public facilities appeared. The Second World War hit Bauska with a dramatic 50% loss of urban structure, including notable landmarks, as well as devastating losses within the community, followed by the period of Soviet occupation. New Soviet Bauska was built around the historic core when new residential neighbourhoods with multistorey apartment buildings, kindergartens, shops, essential services, and several manufacturing and processing factories were developed. A new, wider bridge across Mēmele increased car traffic, so Kalna Street was widened by taking down parts of the Old Town's historic quarters. Since 1991 and the regaining of Latvian independence, the Old Town continues to be significantly influenced by the traffic flow on Kalna Street. With no real bypass and figures on the busiest road in Latvia (Latvian State Roads, 2021), it creates physical barriers, environmental pollution, and disturbance.

#### 4.2. Cēsis Town

Cēsis, founded in 1206, is located 80 km from Riga, with a present population of 14,800. It experienced rapid growth in the time of the Livonian Order when the town became the capital of Livonia. Since the end of the



**Figure 1.** Spatial structure of Bauska.



19th century, Cēsis has been known as a place of arts and recreation; today, Cēsis is an important cultural and artistic centre on the regional and national levels. The spatial structure of downtown Cēsis is dominated by cultural and historic heritage—notably, the medieval castle and the Old Town with the remaining street network (Polis, 2006). The Old Town is bordered by the town centre; it is joined together by an axis of four public squares (see Figure 2): Stacijas Square, Vienības Square, Rožu Square, and Līvu Square. Vienības square also ties together the historic and new parts of Cēsis. During the wars of the 20th century several central quarters in the historic centre of the town were destroyed. Similar to Bauska, Soviet rule in Cēsis also brought in massive development—new residential neighbourhoods with multistorey apartment buildings and standard model private housing, kindergartens, schools, and factory buildings. The new development formed around the historic centre and spread out in all directions, filling up space between street networks and leaving out massive green territories.

### 5. Processes and Transformations

Understanding the general spatial structure of towns and the relation of central and historic parts with the rest of the town is important in order to introduce the identified challenges. Although the Old Town of Bauska is geographically central, it is barely noticeable when compared to the density and variety of functions available in other neighbourhoods of Bauska Town. Today, almost all public functions and services, as well as the majority of commercial services, are located outside the Old Town, the same holds for the availability and density of housing.

The historic centre is a more occasional place to visit; it is not a part of the town’s daily life. As one of the respondents notes:

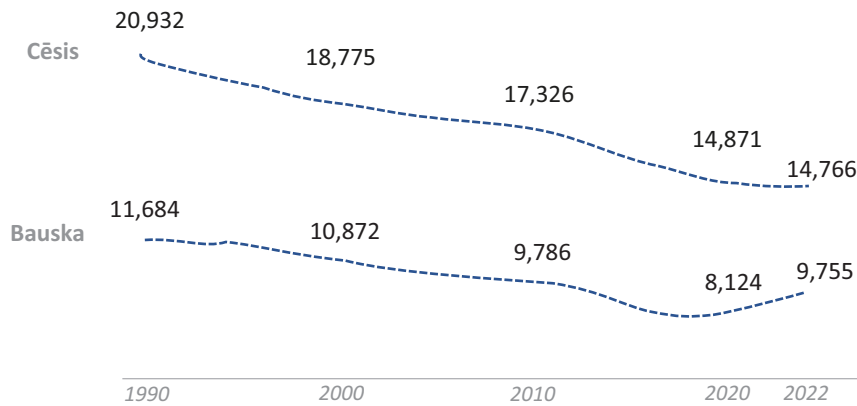
Feels like objects which would invite people to be in the historic centre are decreasing as well as the range of services which still exist there that attract only a few and specific users, for example, there are several car repair services and spare parts shops, but almost no groceries.

In contrast, the historic part of Cēsis functions as the central part of the whole town, hosting a variety of functions that are important and used by inhabitants on a daily basis. However, there are still some challenges to be mentioned that are relevant for Cēsis and Bauska alike.

For several decades, the historic centres of both towns were facing the loss of their substance and role of being the central places of social life. Although the population density in the historic parts of both towns is balanced (Stapkēviča, 2018), the populations of both towns are declining (see Figure 3). Although this decline is more visible in Bauska, in both towns, there is a perceptible presence of vacant plots and unused or even abandoned spaces. This spreading of emptiness, not least at the street level, is caused by shifts in the marketplace (in Bauska) and the building of new shopping centres (in both towns) that outcompete individual retail and services in the central parts of the towns. In the case of Bauska, ethnic diversity and household income gaps are also noticeable challenges for the municipality. According to a long-time inhabitant, “Difference in the situation [with inhabitants] is dramatic, although



**Figure 2.** Spatial structure of Cēsis.



**Figure 3.** Population dynamics in Bauska and Cēsis. Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2022).

there are different people living [here], visibly there are many poor [people] living in the neighbourhood.” Furthermore, respondents representing the municipality note:

It is also a great concern for us [municipality] that many Old Town inhabitants are in need of social and financial support; this also influences resources that could have been used to enhance the built-up environment in the required amount.

The established structure of property rights is now often causing situations where the building and/or land has several owners with different needs, opportunities, incomes, and outlooks, which makes property maintenance and development challenging. Additionally, the quality of existing buildings, both housing and commercial property, remains low. For example, one of the respondents noticed that, in the case of Bauska, many property owners are reluctant to invest in improvements; at the same time, properties are still offered for rent, which is an appealing offer for socially and financially challenged tenants. This, in turn, is influencing the overall structure and challenges of the community, which various respondents representing NGOs and the municipality also noticed. Finally, both towns experience growth in private and commercial traffic and transit through the network of central streets.

During the past two decades, municipalities have gradually attracted funding from the European Union, so reconstruction has taken place for several selected buildings and streets (e.g., the castle, the historic town hall and square for Bauska and the castle, church, and Rose Square in Cēsis). The influence of governance has been central to all decisions and processes. In the case of Bauska, the local government has never prioritised partial or comprehensive regeneration of the historic centre. However, in Cēsis, the local government has turned out to be the key driver for change, establishing various supports and enabling mechanisms to enliven activities in the Old Town. Finally, the presence and activities of the local communities are noticeable in both towns. However,

the specificity of the established citizen-led NGOs differs. In Bauska, a local NGO was the driver for bottom-up development of the Old Town. In Cēsis, the activities of local inhabitants have been much more scattered in time and place, though mutually complementary.

The historic centres of Bauska and Cēsis contain internal spatial assets and cultural, social, geographical, and potentially also economic values, but many of these existing assets are neglected or poor in quality, inaccessible, or weak in capacity to act. In both towns, the activity and capacity of local communities are increasing, but municipalities looking for new approaches must be able to more effectively direct the unlocking of this potential. Some municipal support mechanisms and participatory procedures exist—more so in Cēsis and less so in Bauska; however, as mentioned by many interviewees, these are rather uninviting and unclear.

### 5.1. Bauska Town: Fragmented Space and Interests

The ongoing gradual and multi-layered decay of the historic urban landscape of Bauska was triggered by the fragmented and short-sighted decisions that made several socially important functions degrade and vanish. These decisions also caused many other functions to switch their locations to the outside of the historic centre, thus leaving the Old Town less attractive than its historic and geographic potential would allow. The municipality, as the responsible body for spatial planning and governance at the local level, was and still is lagging behind, with no comprehensive vision and scarce support regarding the much-needed regeneration. The Old Town’s NGO was established in 2002 by local inhabitants, entrepreneurs, and enthusiasts who united to take action to preserve and develop the values of the downtown.

When interviewed, municipality representatives and various stakeholders suggested that the urban blight in the central part of the Old Town was noticed by the municipality, which attempted to slow it down through several reconstruction projects. The central square with the historic town hall and two parallel streets were

reconstructed with co-financing from the European Regional Development Fund. These projects had long inception phases, starting with ideas in 2010 and later met with bumpy realisation phases due to unexpected technical conditions requiring extra financial input.

Although established earlier, the Old Town's NGO became more activated with the reaction to the ongoing transformations. The realisation of reconstruction works bothered active inhabitants, and not without reason. When projects were finished in 2016, it became obvious that even though the streets were refurbished, the old historic paving stones had been changed to simple concrete bricks. Due to complicated geological conditions and limited funding, the street's surface became higher, disturbing the existing entrances of buildings at some points (see Figure 4). Most importantly, however, the refurbishment itself did not succeed in sparking the expected revival of street life—Small businesses and enterprises as well as inhabitants were still leaving the historic centre. In addition, these reconstructed streets became arteries of much more intense car traffic, disrupting the life of the Old Town.

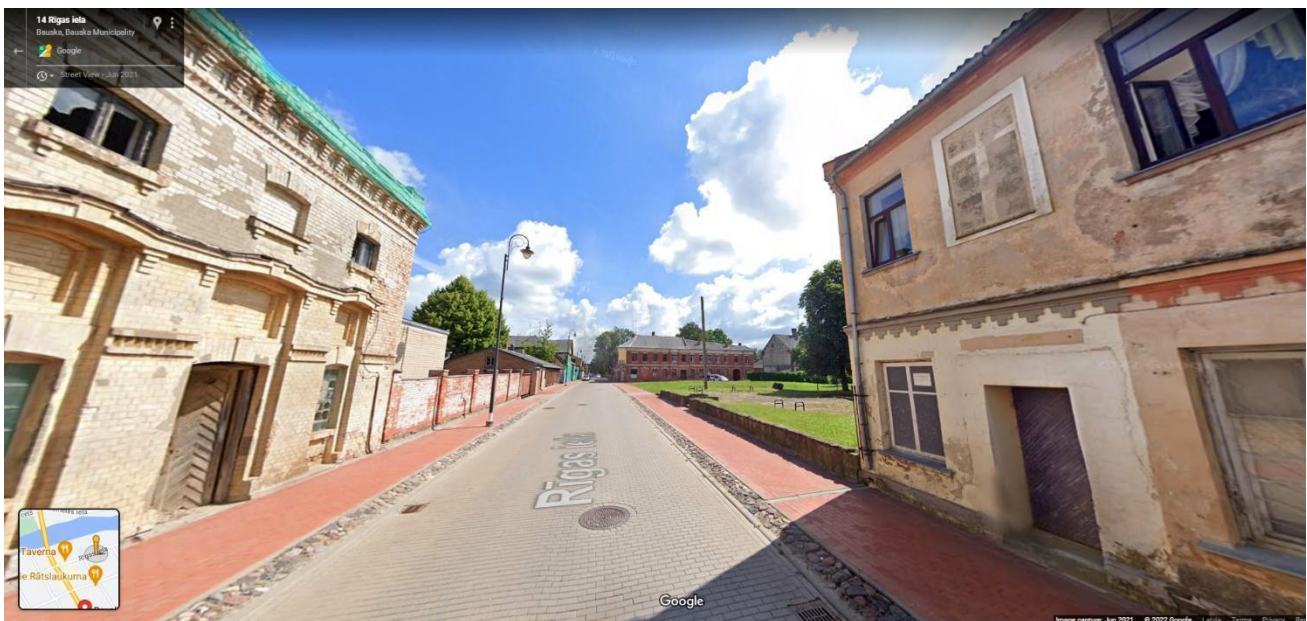
Since the reconstruction, the situation with the central square and the historic town hall of Bauska has improved. The town hall building is used for many public gatherings and small exhibitions, and it is a magnet for locals and visitors alike, as the tourism information centre is placed on the premises. Several buildings forming the square are filled with private and public services; hence, the influx of people is steady on a daily basis and is multiplied by special occasions when the square is used for gatherings during the largest events of the year. However, both the square and the town hall are

located right next to the busiest and loudest street in the town, Kalna Street, which is an intensive part of the European highway network that is heavily used by private and cargo traffic. The accessibility and comfort of inhabitants and visitors are thus being constantly disturbed in the Old Town (see Figure 5).

Further examples of fragmented space and interests are evident in situations with even a countrywide impact. Firstly, Bauska's medieval castle complex (see Figure 1) is a popular international tourist attraction, and it is protected and supported at the state level as a historic monument. However, it is lacking connection and synergy with the Old Town. Secondly, as mentioned before, the town is crossed by a busy European traffic corridor, and although discussions about bypass constructions have been going on for decades, it is expected to be a vastly significant investment project.

As mentioned, the NGO was formed under the common understanding of and belief in the existing historic and cultural values of Bauska. Furthermore, the activism of the NGO mainly targeted the local municipality with awareness raising, dialogue, and call to action to safeguard and develop the historic neighbourhood. As one of the respondents states:

We were striving to bring back life [in the town's centre]. If the reconstruction of public spaces done by the municipality was scattered and questionable in terms of involvement of inhabitants, we discovered that the life of courtyards was very vibrant. That is how the idea of a festival of courtyards was born to open and demonstrate local private and seemingly mundane, but at the same time very understandable



**Figure 4.** Rīgas Street in Bauska, 30 m from the central square. Abandoned buildings and spaces can be seen in the front; a bit further to the right, there is a vacant plot and an abandoned square, and in the back, the buildings to the left are partially abandoned and covered with a green safety net to guard against accidents. The quality of pavement materials can be observed, as well as the disturbed level of existing entrances and the reconstructed pedestrian pathway.





**Figure 5.** Aerial view of Bauska: In the middle are the former town hall and town hall square, with Kalna Street to the right. Source: Timermanis (n.d.).

and engaging everyday life. Furthermore, there is a great potential in local active citizens ready to act [for example] I recall an artist who decorated some shabby buildings in the Old Town to attract broad attention to the issues of dilapidation.

During the last decade, the NGO introduced and organised an annual festival of courtyards (see Figure 6), supported artistic and educational interventions within the Old Town, initiated and curated the reconstruction of the church garden, and introduced opportunities for local



**Figure 6.** Festival of courtyards in Bauska's Old Town. Source: Namiķis (n.d.).



inhabitants to receive advice and support if they decided to restore their historic wooden doors or windows. Finally, the NGO initiated constant discussions with the municipality, which in turn led to the establishment of a joint municipal council dedicated to issues related specifically to the Old Town.

### 5.2. *Cēsis Town: Interplay of Top-Down and Bottom-Up Initiatives*

At the beginning of the last decade, the historic centre of Cēsis was slowly vanishing due to the state-wide economic recession of 2008–2010. As a city representative noted during an interview, “The old town felt like a ghost town—Local businesses were closing due to insufficient business and high maintenance costs, streets seemed greyish and empty, even historic buildings had lost their charm.” To change the situation of abandonment and lack of social activities and gatherings, the local administration searched thoroughly and decided to take a bold step to develop a bid to become the European Capital of Culture for 2014. Although the bid was unsuccessful, this effort started regeneration processes in the town through a heritage, cultural, and creative prism.

From 2010 to 2020, Cēsis implemented several infrastructure projects of different scales and developed several support mechanisms to foster the regeneration of the historic centre through creativity and culture. In addition to the implementation of relatively sizable projects like the construction of a regional concert hall or the organisation of annual festivals of public discussion, the municipality of Cēsis works closely with the local community. For example, support programs were developed—one for the refurbishment of the historic centre streets, financed by property tax income from the area, and another one for the property owners to restore or reconstruct historic architectural elements. Furthermore, a grant scheme was established to support entrepreneurs and businesses representing creative industries and aiming to reside in the historic centre, and a coworking space in the historic centre was opened. The involvement and engagement of the local community is a fundamental aspect of all of these activities.

The physical regeneration of the Cēsis historic centre can also be illustrated by its four key public squares (see Figure 2). Rožu square was renovated by one of the very first influxes of European funds. The square used to be a market square in medieval Cēsis and is located at the heart of the historic centre. Although the square is one of the few renovated public spaces, it is mainly used for transit and not for lingering, as it lacks shade and comfortable seating. Stacijas square is the greenest among the four.

The development of Vienības and Līvu Squares is particularly important, as car traffic had previously dominated both spaces. In the case of Līvu Square, the regeneration was a fully bottom-up initiative coming from local inhabitants in 2015. The square is located on the fur-

ther corner of the historic centre and is formed by two converging downhill streets. New borders for the square were suggested, and two scenarios were tested on-site, discussed, and voted on by locals over a weekend. The results were then presented to the local administration, which then allocated support for simple landscaping elements—gigantic flowerpots to serve as bordering elements and materials for benches. However, as humble as this initiative was, it showed a new approach to public space renewal to the local municipality and inhabitants, which played a significant role in the case of Vienības Square’s alteration several years later.

### 5.3. *Vienības Square: The Case of Intervention in the Public Space*

Vienības Square is an important central part of the town, connecting the Old Town with the rest of the historic centre. On special occasions, the square is used for various activities—the Town Day, the celebration of New Year’s Eve, and parades and concerts. Although it was one of the most important squares in the town, it was the least equipped and designed, with an enormous asphalt surface used mainly for car traffic and pedestrian pathways pressed against the facades of the surrounding buildings without any possibility of crossing the square in various directions.

In 2019, town-wide guidelines for traffic safety and calming were approved, and Cēsis started to slowly transform the traffic situation street by street, junction by junction (CIVITAS SUMP-*Up*, 2019). Vienības square was also about to be transformed from a traffic roundabout to a public square. The aim was to start with the improvement of the traffic situation and deal with the design later. A Cēsis city planner commented in an interview:

In order to gain public support and to move deliberately, the municipality decided to implement intervention through experimentation with on-site testing. From the prior experience with the Līvu Square, this approach seemed an applicable one, only this time organised by the municipality.

To find logical boundaries for the square-to-be, the sneak-down method was applied—an aerial photograph of the space taken shortly after a snowfall was analysed and measured. This allowed for settling the dimensions necessary for the one-directional traffic lanes around the square. Furthermore, the shape of a future public square started to become more visible. Later in the spring, the square got its outline—A pop-up square was created over one evening by placing metal construction fences and traffic signs, drawing a pop-up crosswalk to join the square with the surrounding pedestrian pathways and putting up informational banners around the area for car drivers to be informed of the sudden change (see Figure 7). During the next couple of weeks, two scenarios for traffic organisation were tested, and a town-wide



**Figure 7.** Cēsis Town: Realisation of the intervention at Vienības Square in 2019.

online and on-site survey was conducted to gather the opinions of the public on the changes, traffic safety, and potential functions and uses of the public square.

Although widely discussed at the beginning, from the realisation of this intervention, it became quickly visible that the community gained a new valuable and appreciated public space. The pop-up square became a meeting spot; it was used by pedestrians to shorten the walking distance between parts of Cēsis, and the historic monument also became more accessible and visible (Figure 8). However, a noticeable part of the local society, mostly everyday car users, vocally protested the changes by claiming that it made driving through the space more inconvenient. When asked about the intervention, one of the local council members disclosed:

It was not an easy everyday task to implement change in the public space, in a public square that had not seen change for more than 50 years. While specialists of the municipality carried on the weight of the task, we had to carry the weight of polarised public opinions. To realise this [closing the square for traffic] in such a fast, ruthless, intervening manner was somewhat brave and somewhat reckless; it was certainly like ripping off a bandage, and some [people] were

happy, some were furious, no one was indifferent to the fact.

Despite many bumps in the process, the public space experiment was carried out due to the high strategic and political priority, a clear end goal, and positive feedback from pedestrians and occasional drivers. Lessons were learned from the process, coordination, implementation, and analyses, including the capacity of public servants and the involvement of stakeholders. Now, three years after the proposed changes, Vienības Square has become a well-used space that livens up the central part of the town. People of different generations use it as a meeting spot and as a place to have a rest, enjoy a takeaway lunch, or cruise around on skateboards. Nevertheless, it still poses several challenges, such as what could encourage lingering as opposed to transit, how to balance the grand scale of the surrounding buildings and the monument with human-scale objects in the square, and how to introduce activities while preserving the significant and commemorative nature of the monument (Figure 9). Another representative of the town stated: “Whatever we do in this space, we will be judged for it. This square will forever be a gauge for the municipality’s ability to experiment and adapt.”





**Figure 8.** Vienības Square in 2022 with mobile furniture and Cēsis Old Town in the background.



**Figure 9.** Annual city festival in Vienības Square, 2019. Source: Courtesy of Cēsis Municipal Archive.



## 6. Discussion

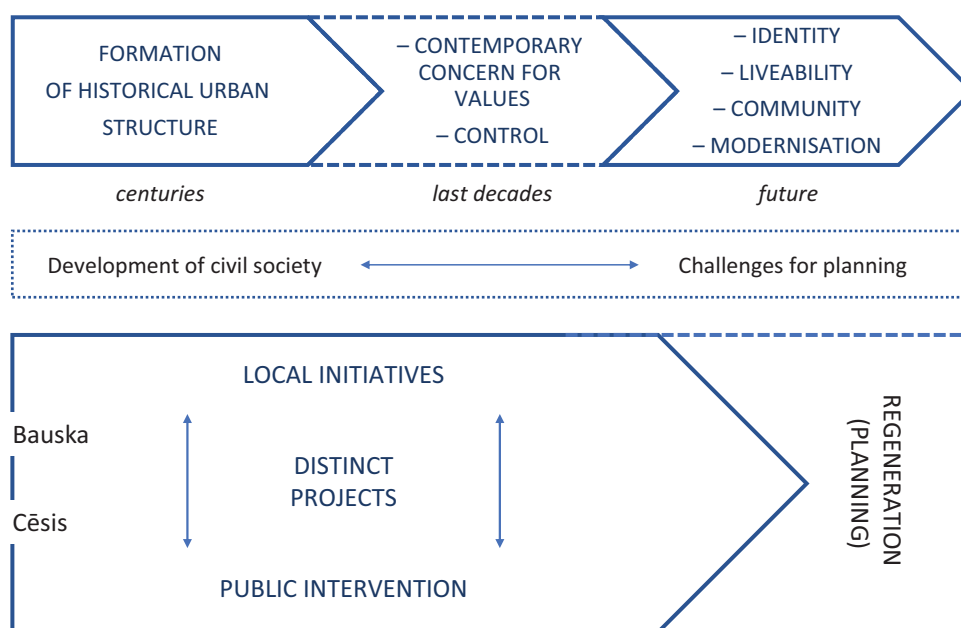
In the cases of Cēsis and Bauska Towns, problems of viability for the historic centres since the 1990s gradually became apparent as the number of inhabitants and business activities and the quality of public space decreased. Restrictions, controls, and lack of support created complications for the potential individual activities and creativity of businesses, property owners, and users. The aim of creating a quality urban environment for modern life, to increase the sense of identity, and an urge for the people themselves to take more responsibility for the liveliness of the central area grew with the gradual development of civil society and the planning paradigm shifting from mainly preserving historical value to creating lively places in balance with modern needs and sustainability (see Figure 10). Discussions and initiatives gradually rose with the formation of NGOs rooted in the local communities. Similar processes also took place in other historical small towns in Latvia. Similar to Cēsis and Bauska, such development took place in a fragmented process, rooted in individual projects and initiatives scattered in time and place. Today, the development of historic centres is an ongoing process, where the interaction between communities, stakeholders, and municipalities plays a major role. Therefore, the experience of Cēsis and Bauska is also valuable in the spatial planning of other towns in Latvia. Pairing these two Latvian towns highlights the importance of connections between various existing stakeholders and initiatives on the one hand and governance structures and procedures on the other. In both cases, valuable assets—tangible (architecture, environment) and intangible (civic society, activism, openness to dialogue)—can be identified. However, some gaps and weaknesses are also present;

for example, in Bauska, interviews mentioned slowness and tension in dialogues between NGO representatives and the municipality, and although active society and political willingness to act are commonly considered as prerequisites to succeed in common tasks, it is clear that leadership in sustaining productive communication and links is also important.

Until now, the development of historic centres has taken place in the form of individual infrastructure and public space improvement projects. Current practice shows that planning in relation to historical centres is not in line with the new development requirements. Now, both towns are in search of a more comprehensive development approach to historic centres, as the normative territorial planning practices and individual development projects are not sufficient.

Interviews with local planners, active inhabitants, authority representatives, and representatives of NGOs revealed that the development of historic centres should be based on the special values of these territories, strengthening their identity and community participation and that their vibrancy is also closely related to modernisation. In the case of Cēsis, municipal specialists emphasised that a special, clear development plan for the historic centre is needed. Almost all interviewees expressed the opinion that further development of the centre is related to deeper cooperation between stakeholders and the need to look for new techniques in spatial planning. One step in this search involves experimental interventions in close cooperation with local stakeholders. In the case of Bauska, in circumstances where there is also a lack of a common vision for the development of the Old Town, NGOs and stakeholders largely express a similar opinion.

Cēsis provides valuable experience regarding municipality-led interventions. In the case of Vienības



**Figure 10.** Development processes, enablers, and challenges for planning in two Latvian towns.

Square, the municipality acted as an initiator, trying to be agile in their experimentative approach, but also confronted a range of bureaucratic, organisational, financial, and communication challenges. This approach contrasts with the traditional ways for any introduction of changes in public space, which demands different resources and is often over-regulated in planning in historic centres. Furthermore, the example of Cēsis highlights the possibilities of a new type of interaction between the municipality and the inhabitants, which in turn demands new management and planning tools. In the case of Bauska, stakeholders representing the municipality, civil society or entrepreneurs expressed their concerns about the condition and neglected potential of the Old Town and the central part of the town. However, the fragmentation of realised initiatives, lack of principles, and coordination of support on one hand and the aware and concerned stakeholders on the other are quite contradictory, and the situation signals that communication and cooperation among stakeholders are rather weak or inconsistent regarding a common vision. In order to achieve the readiness of municipalities to change their mode of operation, it is important to design an applicable methodology to manage the processes. Furthermore, municipalities need to take the lead in facilitating dialogues and changes, while civic society needs to be accepted as the main partner.

## 7. Conclusion

Cēsis and Bauska are comparable in many aspects, not only with each other but also with other small and medium towns in Latvia going through similar socio-economic trends and transformative challenges. The analysed cases show that one very important aspect is the role of the historic centre in the everyday life of the whole town. In Cēsis, the historic centre still needs significant improvement in the quality of public space to strengthen conditions for living and commercial activities, but it is generally entwined with the rest of the town through a variety of social, public, commercial, and cultural functions and services. In Bauska, however, the context of disconnectedness from adjacent neighbourhoods, physical fragmentation, and periodic fatigue of the local community demands not only improvements but also integration, attention, and targeted collaboration between the municipality and the active inhabitants.

Each town has taken a different trajectory for the processes of physical transformation of the historic centres—top-down projects and bottom-up initiatives evolved through the different extent of local community involvement and cooperation between various stakeholders. All these aspects are fundamental for spatial planning professionals. In general, the processes taking place in both towns can be evaluated as educative and provide an important experience of interventions initiated by the municipality and initiatives of NGOs. At the same time, further development is required.

To move forward, it is necessary to develop and implement new planning processes. In both cases, a strategic vision for the development of the historical centres is clearly needed. One of the options is to elaborate on the comprehensive regeneration or revitalisation plans with a clear common vision, which would include the improvement of public space, preservation of historical values, strengthening of commercial activity, and deepened community participation (see Figure 5). Special management for the collaboration of communities, stakeholders, and local government institutions, as well as the consolidation of public and private finances, must be created and managed within their framework. A successful process requires a strategic, local needs-based, cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder approach. In the qualitative regeneration process, the existing and potential users of the territory should be maximally involved in development planning, with ideas and practical activities alike. The challenges of the urban historic centres cannot always be solved only with public and municipal resources, so it is necessary to simplify and facilitate the process for activities that can be performed by or together with private resources, including the willingness of local residents to sustain the liveability of their historic centres.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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