A BARN FOR EVERYONE: RURAL COMMUNITY LIFE IN BARN-INSPIRED HOUSES

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ABSTRACT: The social life of rural areas has traditionally revolved around pubs, gyms, and, in recent years, cultural centres. The essence of these meeting places is intricately linked with their formal characteristics. Recently, there have been several significant projects in the Czech Republic that have transformed private estates into public spaces. In some instances, these new constructions draw inspiration from the rural barn. What kind of dynamic arises when these different architectural forms intersect, and how does this design approach influence the surrounding environment? This study primarily delves into two case studies from the small villages of Skalička and Opatovice to explore these questions further.

KEY WORDS: Community centre, farm, hall, homestead, renovation, village

Changes in Community Spaces within the Czech Countryside

In many Czech villages, the heart of community life often revolved around the local pub, (along with a church or school) (Válka, 2011). Larger establishments not only offered a pub but also provided a hall for various activities such as exercise, amateur theatre performances, and dance events (Hůrková; Mezihoráková, 2020). In some cases, the pub even shared space with the local sports association. Today, many of these buildings stand abandoned (Fig. 1 Vitice) or have been repurposed as residential structures (Hůrková; Mezihoráková, 2019).
During the 1970s and 1980s, rural areas saw the emergence of structures akin to town cultural centres, either through new construction or significant renovations of existing buildings (Fig. 2 Starý Kolín). These endeavours introduced non-original elements and materials into the village landscape, including metal door frames, substantial ground floor expansions, and the addition of terraces with concrete staircases (see Figures 3 in Vlastiboř and 4 in Hvoždany). More recently, the emphasis has shifted towards energy efficiency, often resulting in the loss of architectural character and sometimes inappropriate colour choices of new facades.

At present, community life in villages receives support from various policies and is a key objective of European funding programmes (European Commission, 2023; National Network of Local Action Groups, 2023). Such support serves as an impetus for further development. This paper explores a trend in which architects and builders aim to design structures that seamlessly blend with the village’s overall aesthetics without relying on historical pub references. Instead, they consciously draw inspiration from traditional farmhouses and their barns. The repurposing of formerly private buildings is also a viable option.

The barn, with its archetypal form, has become a recurring motif among architects as it offers a spacious and airy interior, a quality often lacking in traditional rural architecture. The use of barn-inspired designs is not bound by the historical presence of these agricultural buildings, as evidenced by the construction of modern barns in locations where they were never traditionally found (Kalakoski; Thorgrimsdottir, 2022).

**Selected Buildings**

In this paper, we discuss and compare two primary case studies:

**Community Centre Opatovice I - Rusina Frei Architekti**

The municipality acquired a building on the outskirts of the village, nestled above a pond. The living area was transformed into a clubhouse, with the restoration of historic openings and the incorporation of romanticising details, such as lamps and switches. The stable and barn adjacent to the original residential section were replaced by a new hall with an open roof (Fig. 5).

**Village Hall Skalička - Ing. arch. Soňa Urbánková**

This project serves as an example of a new structure blending into the existing en-
vironment. The design is strongly influenced by the aesthetics of a traditional farm-
house. The functions are divided into several masses with gable roofs. Beyond the
community hall, the complex also accommodates the municipal office, a smaller
gymnasium, and service spaces like a hairdresser’s (Fig 6).

Additional Examples

In addition to the above case studies, we introduce the Community Centre in Židlo-
chovice, designed by studio Jura et consortes. It features a striking new barn building
primarily used during the summer months. Community barns have also emerged in
other areas, often without formal architectural intervention. Among these villages,
we can mention Grymov near Přerov and Štěpánovská Lhota in the Benešov region.

Currently, several projects are in progress, either based on existing structures (e.g.,
Kamenný Přívoz) or inspired by the concept of a farm (e.g., Brno Ivanovice). Similar
initiatives are also taking shape in neighbouring countries. For instance, the conver-
sion of a barn into a public library in the German village of Kressbronn (designed
by Steimle Architekten, Fig. 7) follows methods similar to those employed in Czech
examples. We are referring to opening up the space to the roof trusses, preserving the
grandeur of the structural height in the interior, and, where possible, retaining the ap-
pearance of a farm building by partially covering window and door openings. In this
case, timber elements were retained while stone walls were quite radically replaced
with new insulated concrete.

Our research includes on-site interviews with village mayors, architects, and other
local residents. An essential aspect of our investigation is the analysis of media cov-
erage related to these projects. We believe that not only the physical realisation but also
the virtual media representation plays a significant role in influencing other builders.

Challenges and Difficulties

Bland Urbanism

We would look for an important public building in the centre of the village, where
it could be easily seen and accessed. In Opatovice, however, the reconstructed farm
occupies a relatively inconspicuous location on the village’s outskirts, moreover, it is
situated over 30 metres beyond the gate to the property. While this approach saved
an abandoned structure, it minimised visual interactions between active participants
and random passers-by. Simultaneously, the small village has to maintain its original
village square, with a shop, inn, municipal office, and bus stop.
In contrast, in Skalička, efforts were made to establish a central point, given the absence of a square in this street-type village. Architect Soňa Urbánková took a bold step by disrupting the typical terraced layout of longhouses and instead introducing three distinct masses. These structures partially emulate the arrangement of a traditional farmstead, including a residential building, barns, and other outbuildings. However, the courtyard has now transformed into a village square, serving the whole community. Thanks to these architectural interventions, one can also effortlessly travel through the premises and continue into the open landscape.

Missing Signs of Public Building

While the Skalička building aspires to become the village’s centre, its design takes more inspiration from traditional farm structures. Both the Skalička and Opatovice examples incorporate the motif of sliding gates, which previously served as the only closure to the barn opening. However, in modern design, these gates function as shutters referring to historical principles, concealing the all-glass entrance doors behind them. In Opatovice, the shutters are crafted from classic wood (Fig. 8), while Skalička employs rusted sheet metal adorned with small decorative elements (Fig. 9).

Working with the entrance hierarchy does not necessarily have to be an issue. Unlike traditional pubs where the primary entrance is clearly defined, visitors may find it challenging to discern the main entry point in these contemporary structures. Both buildings offer multiple connections to the outdoors, enhancing not only their adaptability but also the sense of intimacy. They are frequently utilised by smaller groups of residents, particularly for activities like exercising. This direct access to the tiny clubhouse eliminates the need to navigate through other empty spaces.

Impact on Neighbours

The pub’s historically central position in the village square often allowed it to maintain a certain distance from neighbouring dwellings. However, when it comes to repurposed private buildings, this alteration may open up views into adjacent gardens, resulting in a loss of privacy for families residing nearby (Fig. 10). This issue is amplified when the barn is transformed into a gathering space, as outbuildings were typically situated toward the rear or edges of the property.

According to our findings, apart from events organised directly by the municipality, these community halls are frequently used for private rentals, primarily birthday parties and weddings. In all places, a common approach is to restrict the use of these facilities exclusively to village residents. In Židlochovice, in response to complaints
from neighbours, the number of weddings held there was significantly reduced, and also permitted only for local citizens. This, of course, worsens the economic sustainability of the building.

**Funding Expensive Constructions**

Given the relatively small populations of the municipalities, Opatovice with 119 inhabitants and Skalička with 165, covering the investment solely from the municipal budget was not feasible. In both cases, the municipalities benefited from the leadership of highly proactive mayors who had long been involved in organisations linking neighbouring municipalities, such as micro-regions and local action groups.

In Opatovice, the project received support from European funds, while Skalička secured a subsidy for brownfield revitalisation, as the original building in the village centre had long remained unused. Nonetheless, these investments still placed a strain on the future budgets of the municipalities due to ongoing repayment obligations.

For the mayors, the concern was not only to bolster the social life of their communities but also to rescue dilapidated structures that would otherwise blight the village and generate additional problems, particularly in Skalička. In Židlochovice, there was an aspiration to employ recycled materials in the barn’s construction. Unfortunately, current legislation did not allow the employment of reused bricks, as the construction company could not provide a guarantee for structures built from recycled materials.

**Conclusions**

Transforming formerly private houses into community centres presents a host of opportunities, including sustainable use of existing building stock, preservation of historical structures, and minimal disruption to the village’s overall character. However, this solution also introduces a range of challenges for architects, village representatives, and the community as a whole. These challenges largely arise from adapting a private residence into a public building, and reconciling the dissimilar requirements of a new function and an old structure.

Traditional civic buildings are strategically positioned at the village’s centre, serving as focal points in community life, slightly distanced from surrounding structures. This placement allows for effective crowd management and draws the attention of visitors. In contrast, a community centre repurposed from a former farmhouse can potentially disrupt the daily lives of families residing nearby.
In conclusion, while such transformations offer valuable benefits, the balance between preserving the village’s charm and ensuring the comfort of the immediate community remains a key consideration. This endeavour necessitates careful planning, innovative architectural solutions, and strong community engagement to address the challenges while reaping the rewards of repurposing these historic structures.

References

Figure 1 Abandoned gymnasium with pub in Vitice (Source: Pavel Fuchs)
Figure 2 Rebuilt cultural house in Starý Kolín (Source: Pavel Fuchs)

Figure 3 Cultural house in Vlastiboř (Source: Panorama view Mapy.cz)
Figure 4 Cultural house in Hvožďany (Source: Panorama view Mapy.cz)

Figure 5 Community centre Opatovice (Source: Tomáš Rasl)
Figure 6 Village hall Skalička (Source: Jiří Pařízek)

Figure 7 Barn in Kressbronn (Germany) transformed to public library (Source: Brigida González)
Figure 8 Wooden shutters in Opatovice from interior (Source: Pavel Fuchs)
Figure 9 Metal shutters in Skalička (Source: Jiří Pařízek)
Figure 10 The path to the cultural centre in Opatovice opens up a view into private gardens (Source: Pavel Fuchs)