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Speech by President Vaira Vīke-Freiberga at the opening of the international Europa Nostra conference "Urban Wooden Architecture" at the Latvian National Opera in Riga, on September 7, 2001

Your Royal Highness,
Madame minister,
Excellencies,
ladies and gentlemen,

dear friends and supporters of our common heritage! I wish you all the most heartily welcome to our city Riga, our nations capital, and to Latvia in this season of mists and fruitfulness. I hope you will find here a place where to come back again and again.

I was born in Riga and spent my first years of childhood in one of those wooden houses that Prince Consort was talking about. His Royal Highness pointed out most correctly that creakiness of these houses, that I remember, and its discomforts as well as its charms. I can remember particularly, when my parents would come here to the Opera and leave me alone at home, feeling that creakiness and winter nights and wondering if these were steps of the ghosts that were approaching me.

In the year of Riga's 800th anniversary, it gives me great pleasure to salute such a distinguished event - the conference, "Urban Wooden Architecture". Riga's architecture, which incorporates the city's architectural heritage of wooden buildings, is so rich and diverse that our city has every right to take pride in it.

For a city, even in a European context, eight hundred years means that it has much to look back upon. The anniversaries of cities, like those of people, are occasions for taking stock of the gains and the losses.

A city is often spoken of as a living being: we say *the face of the city, the heart of the city*. Like any living organism, a city changes and develops as it tries to keep up with the accelerating pace of time. It must do so, if it is to live on - sound and solid, but at the same time, eternally built and rebuilt, never finished.

This fate has been Riga's as well. Those who have built the city and those who have rebuilt it have always had to compete with wars and with fires. But even during times of peace, Riga has undergone changes of similar magnitude - whole city blocks have been torn down to make room for squares, streets, new buildings.

Wooden buildings have suffered more than other buildings - from the devastation of wars, from fires, or simply from the ravages of time. Very many wooden buildings have also suffered from changes in our attitudes, in our system of values.

Latvia's traditional architecture is wooden architecture, and, even today, it still prevails in Latvia's rural landscape. For the Latvians, the linden is the symbol of womanhood, the oak, the symbol of manhood. Latvian folksongs also sing of the apple tree, the fir, the pine, the rowan and other trees.

The wood that was used for building houses and furniture, tools and cradles created the environment in which our forefathers lived and in which many of us have grown up. In this wood, one could sense the forces of nature and the souls of long-gone craftsmen.

Wooden buildings are alive, they breathe. But we must help them, we must treat them with respect and with love.

Departure from wooden architecture and the use of new building materials was seen during the whole previous century as an expression of modernisation and progress. Wooden buildings were seen as relicts of a departing era and their replacement simply a question of time and money.

Awareness of the cultural value of wooden architecture has come slowly. It has come together with such concepts as *humane urban environment*, *balanced development*, together with a return to natural materials and attempts to rediscover time-tested standards of aesthetic values in a post-industrial world.

To the surprise of many, wooden architecture, if it is preserved and treated with care, reveals itself in a new light, providing age-old answers to many of today's questions. If the pearls of wooden architecture are freed from their layers of grime and tarnish, they will be ready to shine in a new light, reflecting the afterglow of centuries of history.

Fortunately, many wooden buildings have been preserved in Latvia. Unfortunately, many of them are in a very sad condition. I am happy that Latvian architects and preservers of architectural monuments are successfully cooperating with colleagues in other countries in an effort to preserve these buildings.

Here, I would like to express my gratitude and my appreciation to His Royal Highness Prince Consort Henrik of Denmark, to Europa Nostra and the founders of Latvia Nostra, and to all those who devote their time and their efforts to this worthy cause. I am sure that the know-how gained in Latvia will be useful for other projects that are carried out elsewhere. What you have accomplished here is your joint contribution to the culture of Europe and the world.

I wish the conference all my best. May your efforts be crowned with success, may wooden architecture shine again in all its former glory.