

Manors as rural development drivers and local innovation hubs

Extended abstract

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This paper examines how historical manor complexes can serve as engines of rural revitalization in Estonia amid post-COVID structural change: increased remote work, rising interest in second homes, and amenity-driven migration. The central proposition is that, when conserved and adaptively reused, manor sites act as multifunctional anchors that combine heritage, social capital, service provision, and space for contemporary innovation (co-working, rural incubators, living labs), thereby enhancing local demographic resilience and economic diversification.

European rural regions face simultaneous pressures: demographic ageing and long-term outmigration on the one hand, and new mobility patterns, amenity migration and the diffusion of remote work on the other. These trends create both challenges and opportunities for peripheral places: while many continue to depopulate, attractive rural localities with strong place identity and service provision may capture newcomers seeking quality of life and hybrid work arrangements.

Estonia's landscape is particularly rich in manor sites (ca 2000 complexes survived as complexes or built remnants), and recent market and ownership trends suggest a surge in costly restorations and new private uses – making Estonia a suitable laboratory to study manors as contemporary development assets.

Theoretical framework

The analysis brings together three literatures. First, settlement and spatial theories locate manorial settlements as the lowest service centres and nodal places in the central place hierarchy. Second, humanistic and cultural geography emphasises place identity, attachment, and genius loci as determinants of place attractiveness and social cohesion. Third, rural studies and amenity migration research show how natural and cultural amenities drive in-migration and local economic change.

Settlement and spatial theories provide a structural lens for **understanding manorial settlements as historically embedded service nodes** within wider territorial systems. Central Place Theory (Christaller, 1933) conceptualizes settlements as hierarchically organized service centres that provide goods and functions to surrounding hinterlands. Within this framework, manorial estates can be interpreted as lower-order central places that historically concentrated administrative authority, agricultural innovation, craft production, and service provision for dispersed rural populations

From a political-economic perspective, Lefebvre's (1974) theory of the production of space shifts the analysis from functional hierarchy to social construction. He argues that space is produced through interactions between spatial practice (material uses), representations of space (planning, power, ideology), and representational spaces (lived experience). **Manorial complexes can thus be seen not only as service nodes but also as historically produced socio-spatial formations** that embody elite power, agrarian modernization, and symbolic order. Their contemporary adaptive reuse may represent a reconfiguration of spatial practice, transforming feudal administrative and production hubs into innovation ecosystems.

Castells (1996) contributes a **networked understanding of spatial organization**. In the "space of flows," digital connectivity reduces the tyranny of distance and allows peripheral nodes to integrate into global circuits. In a remote-work era, restored manorial settlements may function as hybrid nodes combining the "space of places" (localized identity and heritage) with the "space of flows" (digital infrastructure and global networks). This perspective helps reinterpret peripheral manor villages not as marginal residues but, if they succeed in attracting influential business and media leaders, as potentially strategic nodes within polycentric, digitally mediated regional systems.

Polycentric development approaches (Davoudi, 2003) emphasize functional complementarities among settlements of different sizes. Rather than viewing peripheral manor settlements as subordinate, polycentricity suggests that they may play specialized roles in heritage tourism, agri-tech incubation, and creative residencies within wider regional systems, allowing manor-villages to regain functional relevance in a digitally integrated but territorially uneven landscape.

Humanistic geography foregrounds lived experience, meaning, and attachment as central to spatial attractiveness and cohesion. Relph (1976) introduced the concept of placelessness, arguing that homogenized development erodes authentic place identity. **Manorial landscapes** with their architectural distinctiveness, historical narratives, and symbolic depth **counteract placelessness by reinforcing uniqueness and continuity**. In this sense, preserved manor complexes may serve as anchors of authenticity in a globalizing rural economy.

Tuan's (1974) concept of **topophilia** highlights the affective bond between people and the environment. Emotional attachment emerges from aesthetic appreciation, memory, and symbolic meaning. Manorial parks, tree-lined alleys, and historical interiors may evoke strong affective responses that shape residential preferences and migration decisions. These emotional geographies can influence demographic patterns as much as economic factors.

Norberg-Schulz (1980) developed the concept of *genius loci*, emphasizing that **architecture and landscape embody the spirit of place**. Built heritage structures frame existential orientation by providing recognizable forms and cultural continuity. Restored manors can

therefore reinforce ontological security for residents and newcomers, offering spatial narratives that connect past and present.

Stedman (2003) provides an environmental-psychology perspective by linking place attachment to landscape meanings and satisfaction. He argues that attachment emerges not only from physical characteristics but from socially constructed interpretations. This insight is crucial: **manors function as symbolic capital when local communities narrate them as shared heritage**, innovation hubs, or emblems of resilience. Social cohesion is strengthened when heritage sites serve as platforms for collective memory and community engagement rather than exclusive enclaves.

Together, these humanistic approaches suggest that manor settlements generate attractiveness not merely through infrastructure but through identity, authenticity, and shared meaning—critical components of long-term rural resilience.

Rural restructuring literature demonstrates that migration patterns increasingly reflect lifestyle preferences and amenity values rather than purely employment considerations. McGranahan (1999) empirically demonstrated that **natural amenities**: climate, landscape, recreational opportunities, and the like, **drive rural population growth** in the United States. Amenity-rich areas attract migrants with higher human capital, stimulating service economies and entrepreneurship.

Building on this, McGranahan and Wojan (2007) argued that **creative-class workers are disproportionately drawn to rural areas with environmental and cultural amenities**. Their findings challenge the assumption that innovation is exclusively urban. In heritage-rich manor landscapes, cultural capital and aesthetic value may function as pull factors for remote workers, entrepreneurs, and cultural producers.

Phillips (2004) conceptualized counterurbanization as a complex process involving both economic restructuring and socio-cultural reimagination of rurality. **Migration to rural areas is shaped by representations of authenticity, community, and environmental quality**. Manorial landscapes contribute to this symbolic reimaging by embodying history and architectural distinction.

Müller (2011) and Hall and Müller (2004) emphasized the economic and demographic impacts of second-home ownership. **Second homes can stabilize local housing markets, increase service demand, and strengthen seasonal economies**, but may also intensify price pressures and social differentiation. In post-pandemic contexts of flexible work, second homes increasingly become primary or semi-permanent residences, reinforcing rural demographic shifts.

Halfacree (2007) proposed a **trialectic model of rural space integrating material conditions, lived experiences, and representations**. This framework aligns well with manor-based development: the material estate (architecture and land), lived practices (community events,

co-working, tourism), and representational narratives (heritage branding, rural idyll) interact to produce new rural identities and development pathways.

Thus, **classical and contemporary conceptual tools provide a multi-scalar understanding of how material form (manor buildings and estate landscapes), symbolic capital (stories, identity) and services (cultural events, workspaces, training) interact to shape demographic and economic outcomes.** When digital connectivity reduces spatial constraints, then manorial settlements may serve as catalysts in attracting human capital, fostering small-scale entrepreneurship, and diversifying rural economies.

The “smart manor” hub

The paper proposes a functional model where preserved manor complexes combine the following components:

1. **Smart living labs** – demonstration sites for precision/organic agriculture, renewables, microgrids and digital twins for estate management.
2. **Co-working & incubators** – affordable workspaces, mentorship and accelerators for agri-tech, creative industries and micro-manufacturing to capture remote workers and local entrepreneurs.
3. **Cultural & community facilities** – maker spaces, archives, festivals and community programming that sustain local identity and social capital.
4. **Education & skills upgrade** – many function as schools so far and have been downsizing over the last decades, but may extend their educational functions by digital and vocational programmes for adults, bringing in that way new people and integrating newcomers and locals.
5. **Eco-tourism and agro-education** – farm-to-table experiences, trails and residencies that monetise heritage and landscape sustainably.

The model produces effects through multiple interacting pathways: (a) direct employment and service provision; (b) place-marketing and image creation that attract residents and tourists; (c) creation of social and cultural capital that raises local cohesion; (d) spillovers to housing markets and small business formation; and (e) demonstration effects that reduce barriers for local adoption of green and digital technologies.

Research design

To test whether manor presence and condition correlate with better demographic and economic outcomes, the paper outlines a comparative mixed-methods design focused on peripheral localities (density < 8 inhab/km² or distance > 50 km to the nearest centre). Quantitatively, village group (“kant” in Estonian) population change, housing transaction data and land-board records will be used to compare manor vs non-manor settlements over recent census periods. Spatial analysis will map typologies of manor condition (restored,

partially used, abandoned) and relate these to migration and housing trends. Qualitatively, case studies will investigate local narratives, place attachment, governance arrangements, and the practicalities of adaptive reuse and funding.

The paper aims to (1) supply empirical evidence about a previously under-researched heritage asset in rural development debates, (2) propose an actionable typology and functional model (the “smart manor”) for policy and local stakeholders, and (3) show how combining material heritage with digital and green transitions can produce inclusive rural revitalization. If validated, the manor-as-hub model could inform EU rural development programmes, heritage funding instruments, and local entrepreneurial strategies for peri-urban and remote areas.

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