

When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, commissioners and architects were ready to remake their nation. The results have developed from hard-core commercialism and privatization in the '90s and a demand for high-quality public buildings and transformation projects in the '00s, to the point where Estonia finds itself today. An open competition system now directs young and established architects alike to rethink the quality of public space. But the Baltic state is a small nation and competition is harsh, forcing every architect to maintain a sharp focus and aim for the unexpected.

The power of architecture: real and virtual

TEXT: TRIIN OJARI



Next year, Estonia will celebrate 25 years since breaking away from the Soviet system and restoring its own independence. The disruption was both political and cultural: in Estonia, the ruling regime was driven out very quickly and more radically than in many other Eastern European countries, and Estonian society was carved up much more cruelly than could ever have been imagined in the neighbouring Scandinavian welfare states. In terms of the built environment, the disruption left the nation with a great deal of valuable historical heritage, mass Soviet construction that rolled across the country like an architectural bulldozer, a strong and original architectural tradition, and a plethora of empty spaces – potential development zones. Neo-liberal economic policy and the supremacy of personal freedom met in the modern-day city – fertile soil for the renewing society's dreams. The perpetual transformations of the city, foremost of which the consistent covering over of earlier historical layers (chiefly with Soviet-era architecture), the fight for public space, and a powerful construction boom, all shaped people's understanding of space and the new societal shift and political connections, as well as the living environment as a multi-layered and easily damaged value.

Throughout this entire period, the image dominating Estonian architecture has been youthful, bold, and promising. It arose from the very same conditions affixed to the shield of freedom and independence. At the same time, Estonian architects are very European, addressing topics such as quality of material, context, and sociality – the relationship between structures, humans, and public space. Organizing open architectural competitions has always held an important place in Estonia, and doing so has significantly improved the architectural quality of social structures. One can say that all of today's top buildings have arrived via competitions. One can also speak of at least two distinguishable generations of young Estonian architects over this quarter-century stretch: firstly, architects in their early forties who have won a multitude of competitions in the first decade of the 21st century, and who are able to boast an exceptionally long and impressive list of built projects; secondly, the ten-to-fifteen-years younger 'post-boom' generation, which is interested in both architecture's virtual technologies and its direct contact with the user – for example, interventions

in urban space with the help of installations, exhibitions, or other output of temporary nature. An interesting side note: the former were the latter's teachers at university.

Estonia is a very small country, and every change in the city, every new structure, is subject to attention, a sign of some stylish trend, or even a shift in the direction of architectural policy. Thus, there was reason to speak some time ago of a boom in original private homes and mass suburbanization. Slightly later, a profusion of new social buildings – schools, day cares, and sports facilities – was noticeable. Today, the trend is definitely the reconstruction of the city centre, the conjoining of old and new architecture, and the return of the topics of dwelling and the residential environment. The sociality of architecture and the vision of the urban environment as a single whole is becoming ever more important. Aside from monumental and often quite vain public buildings, more and more significance is being placed on public space, the alteration of existing buildings, and urban areas of cultural and historical value. In addition to this is the right of citizens to be involved in the negotiation of issues concerning planning, which often leads to a state of war between residents on the one hand, and developers and municipal authorities on the other. Increasingly, architecture is a matter that affects all of us.

Naturally, Estonian architecture is a part of the process of globalization, which means unification in terms of building technology, materials, education, capital flows, and the real estate business. Ever more often, architecture's image is impacted by the media and the online environment – the line between virtual and real space is being blurred, while lived experiences, which were drawn from the physical environment up until now, are moving further and further into the realm behind screens. The path to the birth of experiential and innovative architecture, to the 'real thing', is becoming ever harder, and each new good project is that much more valuable. In any case, the context in which Estonian architects are acting today – with freedom and international influences, as well as a strong sense of environment and the constant feeling of someone breathing down the back of their necks as a result of the small community – is keeping the focus sharp and preserving a chance for something unexpected to emerge. ◀

The Museum of Estonian Architecture – Bringing architecture to life

TEXT: TRIIN OJARI



The Rotermand Salt Storage hosts more than a dozen different architecture exhibitions a year.

The Museum of Estonian Architecture was founded in early 1991, at a time of political anxiety that lasted for a little over six months, until the restoration of Estonian independence. For quite some time already, its permanent home has been the Rotermand Salt Storage – one of Tallinn's most outstanding examples of industrial architecture, completed in 1908. Due to the small size of the local architectural audience (Estonia's population is only 1.3 million, of which over 400,000 live in Tallinn), and following ongoing trends in the contemporary museum scene, the Museum of Estonian Architecture must operate on a very broad front, with the ability to offer something to specialists, tourists, and schoolchildren alike. The museum communicates actively on the international level as a board member of the International Confederation of Architectural Museums (ICAM), and has good ties with Nordic and European architectural institutions.

Like the majority of architectural

museums in the world, the Museum of Estonian Architecture focuses on collecting, researching, and displaying 20th-century architecture. It possesses an outstanding archive of drawings and design projects from the 1920s and '30s, as well as from the Soviet period, and also a photo archive and a constantly expanding collection of models. The greater portion of the latter is on display as part of a recently opened permanent exhibition titled *Space in Motion: A Century of Estonian Architecture*. Lively interaction with the issues surrounding contemporary architecture is important to the museum as well, since residing in a rapidly changing city means an obligation to analyse today's living environment and acquaint the greater public with it. The museum's exhibitions on local architectural history, international practice, and the most up-to-date architecture, still in its conceptual phase, offer ways to teach individuals to notice that same environment.

Active in Estonia's architectural scene, in addition to the Museum of

Estonian Architecture, is the Estonian Centre of Architecture, the activities of which are aimed at the promotion of architecture as a sustainable and attractive business. The centre is also responsible for the Tallinn Architecture Biennale (TAB), a key event in Nordic and Baltic architecture, which will be held this year from 9 September to 18 October, entitled 'Self-Driven City'. One of the main events of the 2015 TAB will be an exhibition, *Body Building*, which will be displayed in the Rotermand Salt Storage. Estonia is also renowned for its high number of public architectural competitions. One of the largest projects presently underway at the Union of Estonian Architects is called 'Good Public Space', the goal of which is to find an architectural solution for the central squares of Estonia's county capitals (numbering fifteen altogether) by the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia in 2018. ◀

Info arhitektuurimuseum.ee/en, tab.ee/en



Close-up of a conceptual model from the Tallinn Architecture Biennale



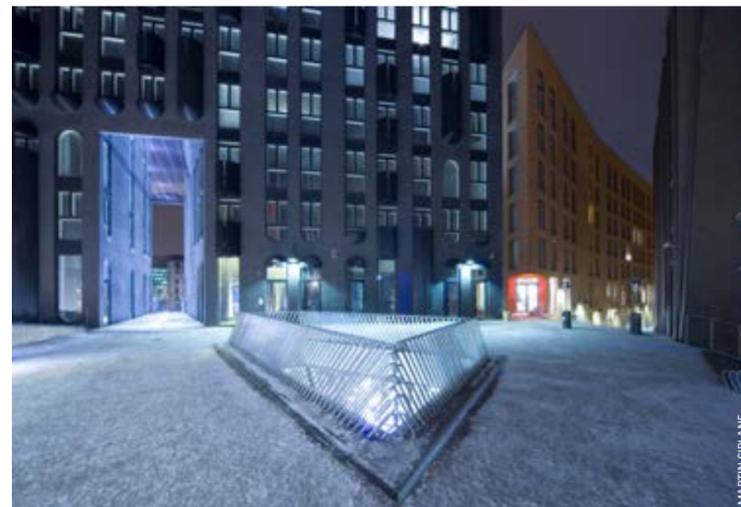
← KOKO architects refurbished the old Seaplane Hangars in Tallinn to house the Estonian Maritime Museum (2012).

Architecture and transformation: public buildings and urban renewal in Tallinn, 2005 – 2015

TEXT: CARL-DAG LIGE

In his attempt to rehabilitate some examples of Modernist architecture, Colin St John Wilson has written about architecture as a practical art. He refers to Greek philosophy, and particularly the Aristotelian tradition, making a distinction between Fine Arts and Practical Arts. St John Wilson reminds us that architecture as a practical art must serve both functional and artistic goals, a unity that was forgotten by mainstream Modernists. He claims that ‘architecture is neither the plaything of aesthetes nor the servant of necessity, but the embodiment of a desired way of life.’ Thus, architecture must express people’s expectations by integrating utilitarian needs and artistic goals.*

↓ Concept for the Estonian Academy of Arts by KUU architects (1st prize competition, 2014)



↑ Tallinn’s Roteramm Quarter has been redeveloped over the past ten years by a variety of architects.



↑ Concept for the Estonian Academy of Arts by SEA and EFFEKT (1st prize competition, 2008)



→ Alver Arhitektid’s public space intervention at Liberty Square, Tallinn (2009)

Public buildings have been one of the foci of attention in Estonian architecture during its almost 24 years of independence. Shifting from the socialist system to a market economy has caused profound changes not only in the economy, but also in mentalities. The influence of Western and global architecture has increased. From the beginning of the 1990s, architectural competitions have become a prevalent procedure for receiving designs for public facilities. Due to the wide-scale public interest and attention these have received, it might be argued that the following case studies of Estonian architecture express (at least partly) the *desired way of life* of contemporary Estonian society.

Seaplane Hangars: rebirth of a miracle of structural engineering

The Seaplane Hangars in the port of Tallinn were designed and built in 1916–17 by the Danish contractors and engineers Christiani & Nielsen A/S for the Army of the Russian Empire. In 2012, the hangars reopened, following an extensive renovation by KOKO architects, as an exhibition space for the Estonian Maritime Museum. The original hangars are considered to be a masterpiece of engineering technology – especially the thin concrete shells – making them one of the world’s most remarkable reinforced concrete buildings of their time. One can regard the hangars as an apotheosis of building technology and militarism. The Russian Empire used them to cement its supremacy in the Baltic Sea region. Only a century later, the hangars would be given cultural significance as well as a cultural function.

The new exhibition for the Maritime Museum (also by KOKO architects) displays a diversity of narratives across multiple layers of information, time, and space. The central idea of the exposition was to divide the interior into three realms: one located ‘underwater’ (on the ground floor), one on the surface, and one in the air. The underwater realm features floating mines and the Lembit submarine, sailboats and cannons are displayed on the surface, and airborne objects can be seen under the concrete shell roof. The interior directs visitors’ focus from an analytical and distant contemplation towards an emotional and direct experience, providing a possibility to merge into the exhibition itself. The Seaplane Hangars project is a great example of a meticulously renovated historical building with high-quality contemporary additions.

Roteramm Quarter: a showcase of urban renewal
The Roteramm Quarter is a former industrial area in central Tallinn that has been redeveloped over the last ten years. Now a hub of business, commerce, and contemporary urban lifestyle, the quarter still exudes the timeless presence of Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, which was filmed in the nearby premises more than three decades ago. The new architecture of the quarter creatively reflects the past and interprets this industrial legacy. In several designs, there is a clear desire for industrial ruggedness (slate, rusted steel, strong volumes). The reconstructions and new additions have been designed by architects Ott Kadarik, Mihkel Tüür, Villem Tomiste, Arhitektuurbüroo Emil Urbel, Alver Arhitektid, HG Arhitektuur, and KOKO architects, among others.

The quarter has turned into a vibrant and lively hub of urban life, offering an alternative to Tallinn’s cosy Old Town and otherwise scattered city centre. The architectural volumes and small-scale urban objects are of high quality, in terms of design as well as construction, but the environment as a whole has been subjugated to the owners’ business interests – it is mainly a commerce-dominated pedestrian zone. Nonetheless, among recent development projects in Estonian cities, the Roteramm Quarter is one of the best examples of combining architectural heritage with contemporary values and commercial interests, while still providing high-quality public space for citizens.

Estonian Academy of Arts: a missed opportunity

The plan to erect the Estonian Academy of Arts’ (EAA) new building has been one of the most ambitious recent attempts to create a public event space in central Tallinn. There have already been two architectural competitions for the building during the past seven years. In 2008, a brilliant, modern, but expensive entry was chosen. The cooperation of two Danish offices, SEA and EFFEKT, envisaged a high building with strikingly fresh architecture and a public square in front of it. It was an ambitious plan to manifest the presence of new Estonian culture at the heart of the country’s capital. However, the design was abandoned due to various conflicts and funding issues.

In 2013, it was decided that EEA would forever bid farewell to its historical site and move into an old industrial complex on the other side of the Old Town. The architectural competition held in 2014

sought to adapt the existing industrial building for educational purposes. The winning entry by KUU architects, completed in cooperation with philosopher Eik Hermann, reflected the capability and social reality of our country in 2014. Compared with the 2008 competition, the winning proposal represents interference at a micro-level and, as finances are scarce, changes will be minimal while opportunities offered by the existing building will be used to the maximum.

From ambitiousness to sobriety

The case of the EAA’s building exemplifies the position of Estonian culture and education in a state which has been dominated by neo-liberal ideology and politics for the past two decades. The social whirlwind caused by the economic and financial crises, which began in 2008, generated radical decisions and forced many decision-makers to retreat from their previous positions and make compromises. It is as if the whole of Estonian society suddenly realized that it actually lacks the ability, people, competence, and financial means for further grand spatial gestures comparable to the Seaplane Hangars.

Returning to St John Wilson’s concept of architecture as a practical art, one must admit that, during the post-crisis years, *practical* aspects in Estonian architecture have started to dominate and the creative, *artistic* side has lost a great deal of its importance. Profound transformations have taken place, not only within the building sector but also in the mindset of society in general. Cautiousness and pragmatism have replaced the visions and ambitions of the economic boom years of the mid-2000s. While sobriety and realism have expanded, diversity and fantasy have diminished – something which is directly reflected in architectural output. Even if this is hard for architecture enthusiasts to admit, those mental transformations indicate, at least to some degree, a new desired way of life for our contemporary society. ◀

Carl-Dag Lige (1982) is an architecture critic and historian, a member of the Estonian Society of Art Historians and Curators. He has been a producer, co-curator and moderator of various architecture events and works currently as a Curator at the Museum of Estonian Architecture.

* Colin St John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture. The Uncompleted Project*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 1995 (2nd edition, 2007), 58–94.

Spaces for learning in a changing society

TEXT: KATRIN KOOV

Education has been a hot topic in Estonia already for nearly ten years. Media criticism has been dealt to the outdated school system and essential curricular reform is underway but, for the most part, everything is carrying on as it was in terms of form: students endure long days sitting on wooden benches, cramming poems and the rules of physics into their heads. At the same time, pressing questions are not raised even now, such as what kinds of educational spaces might actually exist today and tomorrow, and what kind of school environment might better correspond to society's changing needs and the altered nature of teaching. More than 90 per cent of Estonian school buildings date to the 19th and 20th centuries and have a rigidly traditional typology. The classrooms, where walls are papered with classical portraits and chemistry formulas, are like little museum spaces oriented towards the passive acquisition of existing knowledge, and much less towards active discussion and self-made discoveries.

Nevertheless, the 2012–20 Estonian Educational Strategy sets ambitious goals for transforming the school environment and educational culture. In addition to rule-mastering and memory training, Estonia's younger generation requires ever better social skills: the capability to express oneself, to value diversity and cooperation, to think critically and creatively, to take risks, and also to manage indefiniteness and failure. This kind of goal means a significant shift in our attitude towards school and teaching. A school is not merely a site for acquiring wisdom, but is foremost an environment that shapes a young personality and his or her capability to succeed in an open world. It should be an environment where talents reveal themselves and no one is left out. Such a vision presents architects with new requirements as well – whether designing new school buildings or rebuilding existing ones, the aim is now to create spaces for learning that carry within themselves the values of the world beyond.

In tiny Estonia, which entered the modern world of information technology with a gigantic leap, the digital revolution additionally plays an important role in renewing the school system. There is reason to believe that, in the future, laptops or tablet devices will become just as much an everyday part of the educational environment as textbooks and notebooks are today. The Internet is already as

freely available as air to everyone across Estonia. Does the development of IT have an effect on the distribution and design of school spaces, and how? For example, hints have come from Narva College that its computer classroom, designed ten years ago and in a building opened three years back, has already become outdated, as the majority of students already possess the necessary elementary software knowledge as well as personal smart devices that can be used to streamline their work.

So, how should the new kind of educational environment impact the architecture of future school buildings? How will teaching be performed in the future? As a small revolution is already underway in the architecture of office space (especially in terms of interior design, as seen in the Google or Skype offices, for example) – people expect their workplace to provide them with greater diversity and a rich variety, as well as the opportunity to select spaces according to the nature of the work or their own mood – then one can expect such developments to soon also find their way into student-centric school architecture.

Estonia already boasts a few good examples. School structures showing a new kind of approach can be found in Viljandi, Tartu, and Narva. The Viljandi State Gymnasium, designed by salto, offers students a playful common space that follows the hilly valley landscape. The site's geographical context was of definitive importance for the architects. Kavakava's Tartu Health Care College experiments with balconies, broadening learning spaces outside of the school's interior. The University of Tartu Narva College, designed by the same bureau, offers diverse in-between spaces for studying and continuing discussions between lectures (see A10 #50). Recurring elements in the new school buildings include broad stairways, a range of niches and pockets, planes and terraces, and sitting places accompanied by varying moods.

Solutions in the Viljandi Gymnasium building consciously derive from the principle of openness and the pedagogical concept of diversifying educational work by partially removing it from the classroom. Openness favours social learning – cooperation, group discussion, debate, and joint problem resolution. At the same time, varying planes and partitioned spaces enable privacy. Thus, both the needs of socially more- and less-active students have been

taken into account. Transparent walls and doors create an atmosphere of additional openness and transparency, but in order to account for teaching needs, these can also be covered. As such, the openness is not inevitable, but rather can be altered according to particular needs. The school truly is an inspiring environment, where students and teachers alike love to stay, even after classes conclude.

Interestingly, the new schools' classrooms are still quite traditional, but libraries, for example, have already begun to transform. Similar to their typological predecessors, they have workplaces of differing natures, as well as opportunities for solo studying or group work. During warmer months, it is possible to go onto the rooftop terrace to read at Narva College, and if the students or teachers so desire, they can break away to quieter inner balconies at the Tartu Health Care College. The libraries are always open, and in Viljandi's case, it is indeed no longer a separate room, but constitutes a fluid part of the common space.

Semiotics has studied the effect of space on interaction since the 1960s, and only recently have studies arrived at the effects of architecture and interior design on human behaviour. The conclusion (which is unnecessary to emphasize to architects separately because it is so self-evident) has been reached that it is possible to impact the manner and quality of human interaction in space to a very great degree by way of conscious spatial design. A school building is not merely a functional shell for educational activities, but by its nature is a complicated interactive environment that is largely shaped by the articulation and nature of spaces. In a changing society, open, flexible, and empathetic architects certainly hold the trump cards, being capable of understanding the needs and desires of both students and teachers, as well as how that small community functions over the course of any given school day.

Last but not least, since a pleasant spatial experience helps students and future citizens better appreciate the significance of architecture in everyday life, agreeable and supportive school structures are important proof of the necessity of spatial education. Specifically, they demonstrate the fact that conscious spatial teaching should be a natural part of basic education, and should already begin at the earliest possible age. ◀



← University of Tartu Narva College by Kavakava (2012)



↳ Tartu Health Care College by Kavakava (2011)



← Viljandi State Gymnasium by salto (2013)

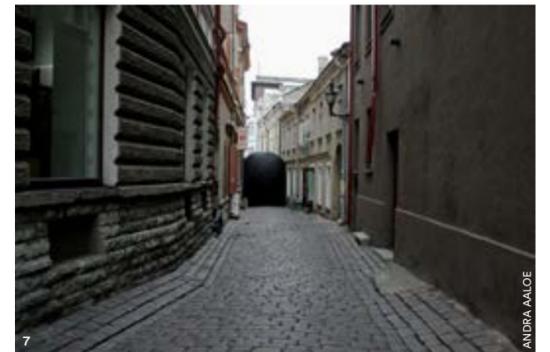


Installation complete

TEXT: AET ADER AND KADRI KLEMENTI

After the collapse of Soviet Union, urban intervention has often occurred in the Estonian context. Installation in public space corresponded to the drastic changes in society, reflected also in rapid developments in urban planning. Installation has been a critical statement, a scream in public for a reasonable negotiation and rethinking (Gas Pipe), a tool to draw attention to polemic issues and policies (Artificial Queue) and even the absurd (Chimney). Following the transition period and later recession, a certain stability has finally arrived, and the format of urban intervention also finds itself being more poetic and playful (O, A Path in the Forest, To the Sea), or even functional (NO99's Straw Theatre). We have compiled a list of several examples to illustrate these various facets within the typology.

Pop-up Estonia



In Estonia, staging interventions into public space to express your opinion has become a kind of tradition. Already in the 1970s, under the strict communist system, Estonian architects and artists found witty ways to form for their critique. As elsewhere, urban intervention today has become common tool among community activists, and these actions are usually carried out through decorative, functional, and playful means. It might be that the quest to question everything, and the shrewd ways of expressing one's criticism, is a mindset that comes from our (Soviet) past. Yet we also hope that this kind of critical expression will not be forgotten while being among the top countries in the world recognized for their freedom of speech.

1

GAS PIPE

Presented for the Estonian Exposition at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2008, focused on a large-scale public space installation in the Giardini. Along one of the main pedestrian avenues, in between the pavilions of Russia and Germany, a 60-metre section of real-scale elevated gas pipe was erected. As the authors have explained, the project was inspired by the controversial enterprise of Nord Stream, a Gazprom initiative to build a direct gas pipeline from Russia to Germany. The initial Nord Stream project to build the pipeline into the Baltic Sea was widely contested from ecological as well as geopolitical positions. Voices arose to persuade building a mainland gas pipe instead, but the outcome of the project was still a pipe in the Baltic Sea. The installation highlighted the spatial dimension of politics and the political dimension of architecture.

Gas Pipe (Estonian Exposition at the Venice Biennale of Architecture) Authors Maarja Kask, Ralf Lööke, Neeme Külm, Ingrid Ruudi Year 2008

2

ARTIFICIAL QUEUE

Around 2010, during the economic recession, the queue was widely used as a populist method by the governing politicians. There were queues for labour market, queues to get a job as a tram driver, the city government demonstratively gave out potatoes and firewood to people queuing at Liberty Square, the central city square in Tallinn. But there are never queues in front of art institutions in Estonia, so a group of artists decided to share the financial grant for their art project, 10,000 Estonian kroons, to form an artificial indicator of need. A long queue was formed on Liberty Square behind the entrance of Tallinn Art Hall, and the first hundred people were given 100 kroons. There was no other exhibition running at the Art Hall, so the *Artificial Queue* filled the space as a living sculpture.

Artificial Queue Authors Andra Aaloe, Aet Ader, Flo Kasearu, Grete Soosalu Year 2010

3

TO THE SEA

To the Sea is one of the many installations that were part of the rare and unique LIFT11 urban installations festival held in 2011, when Tallinn was the European Capital of Culture. A simple and clear formal addition to the Soviet-era city hall, an entertainment and sports venue located at a prime waterfront site in the city centre, emphasized the ineffectualness of the building. An architectural dead-end by design, following the Soviet ideology of restricted seaside areas, the city hall has by now also reached the dead-end of its existence. Nobody knows what to do with this massive, deteriorating building – yet, its landscape form steadily lures urban explorers and Sunday walkers to enjoy its calm, distant view on the sea.

To the Sea Author Tomomi Hayashi Engineer Mihkel Sagar Year 2011

4

CHIMNEY

In 2010, a sculpture of a chimney sweep was uncovered in the Old Town of Tallinn, once more stirring up questions about the quality of art in public space and the transparency of commissioning decisions. In 2011, these questions were underscored by the installation *Chimney*, a temporary chimney erected around the chimney sweep, made of bricks brought by anonymous Tallinners, each adding two bricks to the crowd-built installation.

Chimney Author Anonymous Year 2011

5

STRAW THEATRE

NO99's *Straw Theatre*, by salto architects, added a new note to the golden year of installations by upping the scale and dialogue. The *Straw Theatre* – a theatre built of straw bales – was an independent installation of its own right and there for its own sake, not because of some controversy or political commentary. Its role was as a contemporary space bringing new activity to a forgotten park, a former fortification belt around the medieval Old Town.

NO99 Straw Theatre Author salto architects Year 2011

6

A PATH IN THE FOREST

A Path in the Forest, by Japanese architects Tetsuo Kondo and Mitsuru Maekita, continued the same direction: celebration of space, of spatial experiences, and a combination of the existing – both the natural and the intervention. A graceful, elevated walkway took its audience for a walk among the treetops of the beloved Kadriorg Park.

A Path in the Forest Authors Tetsuo Kondo, Mitsuru Maekita Engineers Mutsuro Sasaki, Yoshiyuki Hiraiwa Year 2011

7

O

The inflatable black ball, five metres in diameter and deflatable enough to fit in a travel bag, was both an event and an object that appeared in various places throughout the summer, serving as a reference and a measure for its surroundings. As an ephemeral black body, O sought its variable meaning in the surrounding space and in the minds of those who experienced it. Within a narrow space, or in comparison to the human body, it was big; in a large, open space or next to a block of flats, it appeared small. Compared to a granite statue, it seemed volatile; fluttering in the strong wind, half-deflated, it was like a natural disaster out of control. For passers-by, it seemed to be moving in tune with the flow of the city's traffic.

O Authors Aet Ader, Andra Aaloe, Kaarel Künnap, Grete Soosalu, Flo Kasearu Year 2011

Architecture needs roots

TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER

Meet the youngest generation of Estonian architects. The first generation to grow up in a really open and international context, they began their practices when the economic crisis hit. We meet with them in Tallinn, and during our discussion they share their views on five topics.



It's only at the end of the conversation that Johan Tali pops the difficult question. 'The previous generation is very successful and builds a lot. Don't you think we might be the generation that skips the building part and focuses on new territories of architecture?' The rest of the group isn't so sure, but they do agree on one thing: 'We have to think about how we can really make a difference.'

The interview takes place in b210's old studio, in a '70s-era building. Their name derives from this address, even though they just moved to a bright new office. The building used to be a government office for the architects and planners responsible

for housing schemes, transport systems, and office buildings in communist times. It was a period when architects were given great importance, and able to actively change the face of society. It is here, in these forlorn but optimistic surroundings, that many young professionals start out.

Present is Mari Rass of Arhitekt Must, an experimental office that adds to the public debate through a monthly proposal for using derelict public space in Tallinn's national newspaper. Their thorough research is hugely appreciated by both professionals and the public. Koit Ojaliv and Juhan Rohtla represent KUJ, which has won many competitions

recently, among them the design for the new Estonian Academy of Architecture. Johan Tali works as a freelancer in Estonia, Germany, and Austria, and was one of the curators of the Estonian Pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale. He will co-curate the first 'Baltic Pavilion' at the 2016 Venice Biennale with an international group of Latvian and Lithuanian curators. Kadri Klementi, Karin Tougu, Aet Ader, and Mari Hunt make up b210, a partnership for conceptual design on any scale, and the designers of the Towing Tank Building and Workshop recently finished in Kuressaare. The office was nominated for the Estonian Young Architect Award 2014.

1. THE ESTONIAN ARCHITECTURE SCENE

How do you view yourselves within the bigger picture of Estonian architecture?

Kadri Klementi The '90s can be characterized as mostly commercial architecture. It was a time when the client, the local authority and the architect had to rediscover what good architecture. Then came salto, KAMP, KOKO, signalling a new era in which quality in architecture was again important. They were the ones that taught us at the Academy.

Johan Tali There was a shift in topics in the '00s: decay, reuse, bottom-up, crisis. Now, the flow of EU money is coming to an end, and we are in crisis. There are fewer and fewer competitions. The focus has shifted from public buildings to public space. We might very well be the generation of public space and public interaction.

Aet Ader Architects have gradually been left out of social issues and public debate. We need to find our way back. Maybe architecture is becoming more immaterial, at least for our generation.

Mari Rass It's not enough to be just another architect. We have to combine different fields, we have to be able to connect different people, and be able to speak about a wide range of topics. And then find opportunities to make physical changes in public space, because that's what we were educated to do.



↑ Kuressaare College Towing Tank Building by b210

2. PUBLIC SPACE

The Estonian Association of Architects has issued a competition for fifteen new public squares. Are you better in designing public space than previous generations?

Johan Tali We should be! We do see things differently. Because we have less experience, we are more eager to adopt new ways of doing things and go along with the NOW. I work a lot with older generations, and we address different topics. They are more client-focused; it's a task for us as a younger generation to get the architectural idea across and to *involve* the clients, not *educate* them.

Aet Ader This 'Estonia 100 years' competition series, albeit not flawless, is important to open up debate on public space and declining small towns, as well as to create commissions.

Kadri Klementi We have set up an architecture school. In fifteen years, we may have raised a generation that is able to formulate issues on architecture and public space. This dialogue with a wider public can lead to more public involvement in public issues. Another way to do this is to help the client in formulating briefs. Working on the briefs, as our generation does, is a great opportunity to increase the involvement of local stakeholders, as well as to improve their commitment to public space.

3. BEING A POST-CRISIS ARCHITECT

Young practices co-create in increasingly diverse teams, and are usually only temporarily involved in the project. Do you recognize that as well?

Juhan Rohtla We are a country of start-ups. We are inspired by having less financial resources rather than an abundance. This creates a strong connection

with context and reality. Which does not eliminate creativity, it adds another layer to the task. **Johan Tali** I am a freelancer; I work with different offices all the time, also internationally. Everywhere we find run-down areas being picked up by local initiatives and then sold by the municipality at higher prices. We have to accept that. The land is not ours, but it has created a culture of starting up and letting go, without long-term commitment.

Aet Ader We do collaborate with artists and are used to taking different positions in different projects. We are a team of partners, but also a kind of freelancer within our own company; we work with other people, outside the office, also as a way of getting commissions.



↑ Work by Johan Tali

4. (NOT) BUILDING

Salto has stated, 'We don't want to make buildings that solve problems, but buildings that ask questions.' The difference between asking questions and solving problems might be creativity. How would you respond to that?

Mari Rass You have to be very creative to be an architect in Estonia. For [our column in] one of the national newspapers we raise a problem and then we solve it. Thus we can be free in what we do and reach a wide public. It's a way to ask questions and make people think about our environment in a deeper way.

Johan Tali In Estonia, architecture education is about addressing problems: everyday problems in the city or the landscape. I want to be more experimental. That is what I find in Vienna. In Estonia, we don't even dare to explore the idea that architecture can be fictional or free. I would be happy to never build anything, to never have a client, even, and still make a difference for the built environment.

Kadri Klementi The challenge is to combine architecture that asks questions *and* solves problems. Maybe our assignment is to not build. That might make us different from previous generations. We think, we research, we experiment.

Johan Tali We could create a very respective task in teaching, researching. We could be a planning guide, educating the public...

Aet Ader ... include temporary use to downgrade the importance of permanence, redesign public space, find new business models...



↑ Estonian Academy of Arts by KUJ architects

Mari Rass Architects should be doing more than getting the right building permits from the municipality. I believe architecture should not become totally humanitarian, only dealing with social problems, but architecture should add value to society in many ways.

Aet Ader I personally want to get our work built. That's easier in Estonia than some other places in Europe, because of our general policy to have open competitions for important buildings. This democratic principle, to give a chance to wide range of architects, should be continued.

Kadri Klementi Our main contribution might be in immaterial architecture, but also in being more active in material architecture. You can't really draw a line between material and immaterial. Even designing a ping pong table with kids is material architecture.

Koiti Ojaliv I'd prefer to be a traditional architect. A very large proportion of our economy goes into the construction of the physical world. Our opportunity lies in the skill to establish a role in that system. The chance to do that is connected with evolution of society as a whole – we need to develop an appreciation for good design. The quality of life right now is represented by a new BMW and other personal commodities, rather than good public space or buildings. We are anticipating for society and communities to start asking better questions.



↑ Experimental rooftop concept by Arhitekt Must

5. INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

You have all lived and worked abroad. In 2018, your country will celebrate its centennial of independent spirit. Let's finish this conversation with some thoughts on Estonian identity.

Kadri Klementi When independence was signed, the question was: Do we make a new start or do we follow on from 1918? The restart was difficult, as individualism got the upper hand and there was almost no feeling of community. We need to feel that we are part of the same society on an everyday basis.

Johan Tali Former generations were much more bound to the homeland. They couldn't just leave and travel, talk, exchange... This is really a big difference. We shouldn't forget that. I am an Estonian architect working abroad. Even while working on a project in Brazil, I am still an Estonian architect.

Mari Hunt Are you? For me, it's not about nationality, but about the region, the city – added to which are international experiences.

Johan Tali What matters is that the culture comes from here; we are able to think internationally, we see the world as a stage, we know how to connect. Spatial qualities do not recognize nationalities, but architecture is a local practice with inert spatial conditions.

Aet Ader International collaborations are great. Maybe what is important now is architecture with a more local identity. Something that would distinguish one work from another. Architecture needs roots. ◀