

A SMALL COUNTRY WITH BIG IDEAS: URBAN PLANNING IN ESTONIA

By Daniel B. Hess

Where in the world is Estonia? The tiny country Estonia borders Russia to the east and is separated from Helsinki by the Bay of Finland. With 1.3 million spread across an area roughly the size of New Hampshire and Vermont combined, population density in Estonia is low.

In recent years, students from the UB School of Architecture and Planning have traveled to Estonia for summer study abroad courses, led by UB associate professor Daniel B. Hess. The three-week course takes place in cooperation with Tallinn University of Technology, where Hess was a Fulbright Scholar in 2011.

Estonia has been an independent republic (or “re-independent”, more precisely) since only 1991 when the Soviet Union disintegrated. Occupied by the Soviet Union since 1944, Estonia was, over the centuries, also controlled by Danes, Swedes, and Germans.

Thus, various layers of cultural influence compose the architectural and urban environment. For example, within an area bounded by a few city blocks in the capital city Tallinn, students experience centuries-old churches (Catholic, Lutheran, and Russian Orthodox cathedrals), ruins from 14th-century institutions, some of the best-preserved examples of Soviet- and post-socialist architecture, and some of Europe’s best *avant-garde* architecture and installations from the last two decades.

UB graduate student Matthew Wattles agrees: “study abroad in Estonia exposed me to a whole world of urban planning discourse centered around the effects of socialism on post-soviet countries and how today’s cities are fundamentally shaped by the socialist policies of the past.”

During the study course, UB students are immersed in Estonian culture as they study the evolution of the built environment, contemporary urban planning in Europe, and sustainable urban planning.

“The study trip to Estonia provided me a precious opportunity to experience a totally different culture and make friends from all over the world,” said Siyao Zhou, a UB graduate student in urban planning and recent transplant to Buffalo from China. “Also, through this program, my American classmates and I get to know each other better.”

Through guest lectures, site visits, and tours, students connect with local knowledge and experience; this ex-

posure often helps students better understand urban planning systems in their home country.

While in Estonia, visitors from UB collaborate with Estonian students of landscape architecture and planning on a short-duration challenge, in which they seek to develop solutions for problem sites with incompatible development patterns and opportunity for intervention.

After a 48-hour charrette to develop solutions, the American and Estonian students together present their findings and recommendations to officials from city gov-



Daniel Hess (far left) with the UB students in Narva, Estonia, across the river from Russia

ernment. “Almost every night after our hard days of work, we would meet up with the Estonian students,” says UB urban planning graduate student Kimberly Schueler, “and they would show us unique and interesting places while we told them about our lives in the United States.”

In conducting the exercise, students evaluate the costs and benefits of Estonia’s Planning Act, a national law that tightly control land development and differs from systems in other countries.

Thanks to its modest size and population, and smaller number of tourists and lower prices (than other parts of Europe), students have opportunities to explore Estonia’s cities and countryside in ways that would be more difficult in other parts of Europe. Estonia is a technologically savvy place (skype was invented here!); with one of the world’s highest penetration rates for “wired” homes and individuals, students learn how digital communication is used in urban planning and city administration, especially for public outreach and civic engagement.

The study abroad course includes excursions to neighboring Latvia where students learn about yet another planning system governed by national laws, and they learn how Estonia and Latvia collaborate on major initiatives of the European Union (such as better rail and highway links between the Baltic Republics and Central Europe, which were intentionally not developed during Soviet times). 🌐