

Transformation of the Built Environment in Estonia: New Perspectives about the Here and Now

Daniel B. Hess
University at Buffalo, Buffalo, US
dbhess@buffalo.edu

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the establishment of independence of the Baltic States in 1991, the Republic of Estonia has experienced sweeping social changes and fundamental shifts in its government and economy. The centrally planned economic system has been replaced with a market economy, and Estonia's membership in the European Union increases cross-border connection and trans-national synergy. Government policy and local infrastructure—formerly developed and controlled under centralized policy constraints—have undergone significant geopolitical changes in recent years, which are reflected in metropolitan spatial structure and the design, construction, and use of the built environment.

Centuries of history in the production of the built environment is preserved and celebrated throughout Estonia, and the legacy of planned uniformity from 20th-century central decision making by Soviet Union powers is in evidence. Changes began rapidly after Estonia was reopened to the world in the early 1990s: Tallinn's Old Town was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site at the same time that modern office tower and hotel construction significantly altered the city's skyline. Like many eastern European countries, the core district of medieval origin—Tallinn's old town or *vanalinn*—increasingly serves as a center for tourism, entertainment, and culture.



Tallinn Town Hall, a Gothic structure dating from 1404, anchors a collection of medieval commercial and residential buildings on Town Hall Square. The building was used as the seat of government until the 1970s.

Image by author.



Tallinn's Old Town (*Vanalinn*), is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and possesses an impressive collection of medieval buildings.

Image by author.

Throughout Estonia, visitors are awed by multiple layers of tradition in the built environment and representations of every phase of urbanization in Europe from the 13th century onward. Estonia's built environment offers a lesson in the history of architecture and the evolution of city planning, from preserved old towns to historic churches to concert halls to manor parks to *mikrorayon* to the last decade's rush of contemporary architecture. Twentieth-century town planning in Tallinn is bracketed by a 1913 comprehensive plan by the world-renowned Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen that was much admired but its implementation was interrupted by World War I, and a locally-produced 2000-2005 plan that was poorly received—criticized for its broad flexibility—and that is being supplanted by a disaggregate district-by-district planning scheme.

Over the centuries, numerous transformations of townscapes in Estonia were precipitated by migration, political upheaval, fire, and war. A succession of foreign rulers sought to make a lasting imprint on the built environment, and consequently town planning at various times focused its attention on rebuilding center cities, promoting industrial development and military might, preserving agriculture, and expanding cities and regions. The built environment in Estonia thus offers a fascinating glimpse of the co-existence of the pre-modern world, modern urbanization, and post-modern eclecticism. Under such conditions of establishing the built environment, it is little surprise that the quality of built environments ranges from mediocre to stunningly beautiful. Fortunately, certain pre-World War II districts were neglected and at the same time spared from demolition by Socialist urban policy.



Early 19th-century and reconstructed neo-classical buildings, together with post-World War II structures, surround Town Hall square in Tartu. Town Hall, completed in 1789, stands on the site of previous town hall buildings. Few buildings remain from Tartu's medieval origins.

Image by author.

Estonia's villages, towns, and cities, networks of business centers, residential districts, green areas, and recreation zones—with appropriate urban infrastructural support—provide diverse places for the small country's homogeneous yet dual-ethnic population (Russian-speaking immigrants arrived in large numbers during the latter part of the 20th-century). However, with access to greater financial resources and bank loans, people can satisfy their preference for new single-family homes, which are rapidly appearing on the periphery of cities. Contemporary challenges include an under-developed transport system, deteriorating modernist tower-block housing estates (or mikrorayon), a housing supply that does not necessarily meet people's preferences, historic town centers and medieval buildings that do not accommodate modern lifestyles and automobiles, and—in a break from Socialist-era controlled metropolitan dynamics—sprawling suburbs around Tallinn, the capital city.

In addition, the roles of the private sector and public sector in land ownership and establishing and maintaining the built environment have evolved over the last two decades. Following nationalization and de-nationalization of infrastructure over the years, there is now a comparatively small share of land in Estonia under municipal control relative to Western Europe and North America.

University students in the built environment disciplines today have more technology at their fingertips than ever before. Multi-disciplinary training is critical: during their professional careers they will likely be called upon to possess various expertise—planning, design, construction, evaluation, assessment. These students enter the design professions with a requirement to abide by national planning laws and architectural policies and are expected to consult frequently with a well-informed public that has ready access to up-to-the-minute information about project plans, designs, and budgets. There is greater competition for individuals in the built environment occupations, as international design competitions provide foreign talent with opportunities to work in Estonia.

Daniel B. Hess conducted a lively discussion about contemporary urbanism with several of Estonia's leading design educators and chief practitioners associated with designing and constructing the built environment. The conversation focused on the transformation of the built environment, current challenges, and university education.

Mart Hiob

Lecturer, Department of Landscape Planning,
Tallinn University of Technology—Tartu College Head of Planning, Artes Terrae, Ltd.

Krista Kodres

Professor, Institute of Art History, Estonian Academy of Arts

Katrin Koov

Architect, KAVAKAVA, Ltd.
Professor and Landscape Architecture Program Coordinator, Estonian Academy of Arts

Pille Metspalu

Head of Planning, Hendrikson & Co. Ltd.
Chair of the Board, Estonian Association of Spatial Planners

Margit Mutso

Architect, Eek & Mutso
Architectural Editor, Cultural Weekly Sirp

Martti Preem

Head of the Comprehensive Planning Division of the Urban Planning Department,
Tallinn City Government

Garri Raagmaa

Associate Professor, Department of Geography, University of Tartu

Mart Siilivask

Architectural Historian, Estonian National Heritage Board

Hess: What are the most pressing needs for shaping the built environment in Estonia?

Hiob: There is a lack of knowledge about how to carry out physical planning in small towns and villages, especially about how to put together high-quality planning documents that can be implemented. Many municipalities are very small, and although their budgets are meager and their capabilities are stretched, they have broad duties related to town planning. There is a lack of trained specialists to carry out town planning activities, and elected officials lack knowledge about the best town planning processes and methods, or even what ingredients make an attractive built environment.

Koov: The built environment has improved after Estonia's recent boom years, but it is evident that high-quality architecture needs sufficient time for the design period—especially time for the gestation of ideas—to produce a comprehensive result that is appropriate for the urban tissue. Fast and cheap solutions are not good in the long term. However, some (extreme) buildings can be good catalysts for developing a district or region, but it seems in Estonia that this method does not work well because of the weak planning system: there is a lack of visionary planning ideas wherein the catalyst may be inserted.

Kodres: Two weaknesses are the concentration of professionals in bigger cities and the lack of money and knowledge in smaller places. Most importantly, however, there is an undeveloped idea of what the built environment actually is and how it affects people's everyday lives and actions. This can be addressed through more active involvement of architects and critics in different kind of media.

Siilivask: First of all, there is a need to insure that the existing built environment— historic buildings, districts and settlements, representing the most valuable parts of our built heritage—is maintained and re-used. Since the 1990s, many historic buildings (among them several of the oldest and most valuable) have been unused or fallen into disrepair.

Although owners often lack sufficient resources to maintain their buildings, sometimes the reason for poor maintenance is a lack of will, motivation, knowledge, and skills. The building legislation in Estonia does not, in fact, motivate people to maintain buildings. When worthy historic buildings are allowed to decay, they are sometimes demolished and replaced with buildings of contemporary property development style, often without architectural value and of poor quality construction. The result is a slow decay in the integrity of our built environment, increasing disharmony of historic urban spaces, and impoverishment of the rural landscape.



Ruins of an ancient cathedral, constructed between 1250 and 1500, are situated in a park-like setting atop Tartu's Toome Hill.

Image by author.

Hess: What are the strengths and weaknesses of collaboration in Estonia between landscape architects, architects, urban designers, town planners, preservationists and engineers?

Kodres: Architects perceive heritage protection as a restriction to their activities. This idea is inherited from the Soviet past and seems to endure due to the views of some teaching faculty.

Siilivask: There is often a lack of understanding of the existing built heritage and of historic urban space among our town planners and architects (although modernism—especially the latter part of the 20th century—is generally an exception). More sensitivity towards historic contexts is needed. There is also a lack of knowledge among today's engineers and builders about traditional building-construction methods.

Raagmaa: There is a spirit of cooperation in Estonia, although Estonians can be distinctly individualistic. However, when it is more efficient for people to cooperate, they tend to do so. An illustration of this is the 1,200 village societies throughout Estonia (established since the early 1990s), which are non-profit volunteer organizations that promote community needs in villages and rural places. The movement has grown to be powerful and the societies are influential, and the villages are arranged in a multi-layered hierarchy that even has representation in the Estonian parliament. The village societies are unique to Estonia—you cannot find the same community structure in Latvia or Lithuania. The village societies perform important services, because small municipalities cannot pursue economic development very well, as they tend to have small municipal operating budgets and small paid staffs.

Hess: Are Estonia's architectural policy and national planning law too weak or too restrictive?

Siilivask: Our planning law is quite good. Still, we often see property developers make pre-arranged deals with local authorities prior to formally following the law. NGOs or private persons who object to such plans often lack a legitimate basis to bring a case to court. To participate officially in the planning process, you must own land that neighbors the plot in question; it is not sufficient to live in the same district or have some other interest. However, this part of the planning act is being revised.

The Estonian building act is very restrictive and more oriented toward new buildings than existing buildings. At the same time, the act makes few demands about the appearance or maintenance of existing buildings. The only regulation is that an owner must maintain a building according to the law until he or she puts the building into use; otherwise, the building must be demolished.

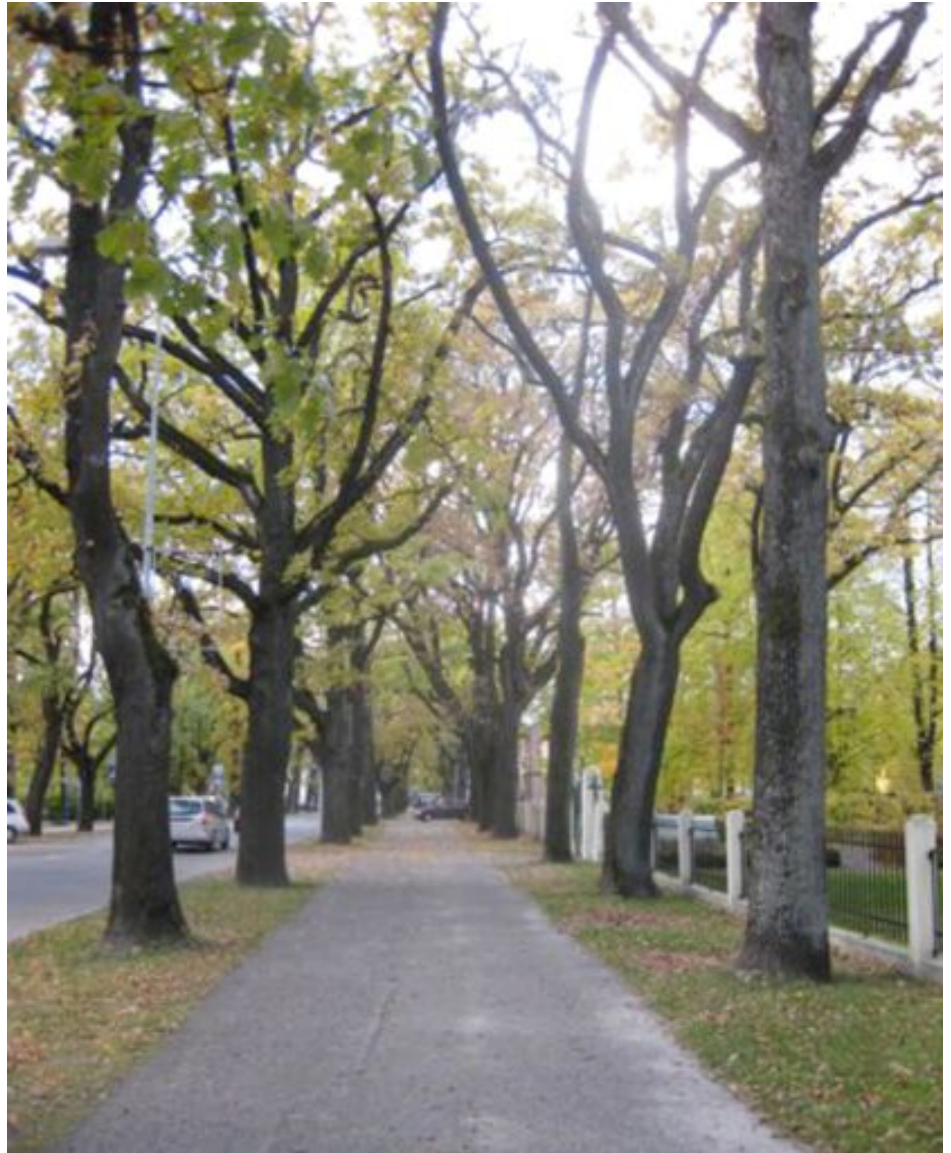
Preem: We must correct the legal system that regulates planning and construction of the built environment, which is currently too disjointed. State and local authorities do not have clearly-articulated priorities. We also lack a state institution to oversee architectural policy. Of course, there is always a lack of money available.

Metspalu: The national planning law makes the job of a town planner easier than if the law did not exist. I find that the planning law has the necessary ingredients and the principles are easy to understand. The law is perhaps too detailed, and would be improved if it contained only the necessary legal passages, and other elements were moved to an accompanying guidance document.

Mutso: The weakness of our architectural policy is always a challenge, and government actions do not help to create a better built environment. That is, the objectives of architects and the objectives of politicians are not aligned. The town planning process often deals with land development and is connected with big money.

Hiob: The process set forth in the Estonian planning law suggests that you cannot predict the outcome, and that the unique characteristics of people and place affect the outcome. While there are many requirements in the planning law, the requirement to produce high quality places is not one of them. We also see a schism between architects and planners, as architects would like to find ready-made town planning solutions that fit all cases, and town planners realize that this is a utopian notion that cannot practically exist.

Kodres: The planning law is complicated, inflexible, and out of date. The law is primarily concerned with the interests of property owners and far less concerned with community interests.



In Pärnu, Mere puiestee, a tree-lined stately boulevard, leads from the town center to the nearby historic beaches of the Baltic Sea.

Image by author.

Hess: “Design for all” and “barrier-free” access promote planning and designing buildings and environments that are inherently accessible to both able-bodied people and people with disabilities. What challenges lie ahead in meeting the objectives of design for all within various types of built environments (for example, homes, private and public buildings, outdoor spaces, transport) in Estonia?

Mutso: This topic is in its infancy in Estonia, and there are few guidelines. In public buildings and streets there is great need for universal access and the possibility of movement without stairs. For example, in the new Freedom Square in Tallinn, it is impossible to move from the lower level to the upper level without using stairs. In comparison, our northern neighbors in Finland have a more advanced approach to barrier-free access and stricter access guidelines in their building codes; for example, *all* apartments must be accessible for people with disabilities.

Siilivask: When renovating historic buildings, churches, and other buildings, there are many challenges in complying with the demands of various authorities and various legislation acts. However, if the building is a monument or it is within a conservation area as defined by our heritage law, it is possible to find compromises. Still, most historic buildings are not considered part of our built heritage, and often undesirable “functional” changes are made in the name of building improvements.

Hess: What are the strengths and weaknesses of town planning in Estonia?

Metspalu: The central areas of many of our small cities are not always pleasant or walkable, but we cannot necessarily blame this on town planning.

Koov: The main problem with our planning system is that we try to implement democratic Nordic ways but then we collide against ultra right-wing landowners within our power/political system; this effect counteracts any attempts at visionary city planning. Consequently, we end up with hectic planning through a plot-by-plot approach.

Moreover, the master plans for cities are formal and blurred, lacking clear spatial ideas. A reason for this is that really good and capable (visionary thinking) architects do not want to work for local governments because of poor motivation, low salaries, and high level of bureaucracy. But still we are convinced that spatial decisions for urban planning processes should be a priority of professional architects as it is in other European countries. Or, to be more accurate, the ideal urban planning team would be a synergistic working group that consists of architects, landscape architects, engineers, etc.

Hiob: A distinct strength is that public participation has increased in recent years. Inspired by, among other things the European “open society” movement established by George Soros, public participation is a critical part of our town planning. In general, we experience acceptable levels of participation for public participation exercises, which have generated some good ideas. There is generally good coverage of architecture and town planning process in the press. In addition, there have been some bad projects in the built environment, and this also encourages people to participate to ensure that mistakes are not repeated.

Metspalu: Our national planning law, established in 1995, has many Nordic qualities, such as its inclusion of public participation. NIMBY sentiments, however, play a role in participation in Estonia, as they do anywhere. Participation levels vary from region to region, with more activity in the urban centers, such as Tallinn, and less activity in small towns and in the countryside, especially in the eastern part of Estonia near communities surrounding Lake Peipsi. Although “planning” may have had lingering negative meanings because of a lack of inclusive town planning during the Soviet era, there is now a sense that town planning provides opportunities to improve cities, towns, and villages. There are even examples where citizens and residents have eagerly become involved in projects—identifying land for the location of new roads, for example—even in the early, conceptual stages of a project.

Hess: How has the practice of regional planning evolved in Estonia?

Raagmaa: Soviet officials realized the importance of “the region” in planning during the 1960s. Before that, they experimented with many regional subdivisions of land for governance purposes—i.e. 636 (+4) village soviets instead of 233 communes, 39 small rayons instead of 13 countries, even 3 oblasts—before determining that the historical county subdivisions, which had been used for centuries, worked best. Now, the study of regional phenomenon is important to planning, particularly to support enterprise development. Every region has its own unique characteristics, and there are usually no policy solutions that fit all regions (even though central agencies would like to believe that there are).



Karlova, a historic district near the Tartu city center, houses a collection of early 20th-century wooden houses with Art Nouveau details. Many have been restored since the 1990s.

Images by author.

Hess: Town planning is often thought to lie at the intersection of various disciplines—architecture, engineering, public policy, urban design, government, economic development, landscape architecture, and social welfare—with the addition of a prescriptive element. Why is there no university degree offered in town planning in Estonia?

Metspalu: There is indeed a great need for town planning education. When Estonia reestablished its independence in 1991, there was no tradition of town planning or town planning education. Before that time, town planning was generally carried out by German-educated architects during the First Republic, and then central Soviet Union planners, and now people educated in Estonia in a variety of disciplines—architecture, landscape architecture, geography, business, government.

Hiob: The administrative demands and bureaucracy involved with establishing a new academic program in town planning is not the problem. But competition between universities, given our small pool of potential students, is. An effective university program in town planning would need to be designed to meet the distinctive needs of Estonia. That is, it could borrow many of the traditions of town planning education in the U.K., the Nordic countries, and North America, but it would also have to be unique for the Estonian market. Given Estonia's small population, there is competition for jobs, and planners will be called upon to be competent in conducting many planning tasks and working at several levels of planning—detailed plans, comprehensive plans, county plans, etc.

Raagmaa: During Soviet times, there were no town planners *per se*, and the “planning” of urban space was the domain of architects. Geographers contributed to comprehensive planning for the industrial sector, as well as feasibility studies and infrastructure planning. Since the 1990s, these roles have been slow to change. In recent years, there has been interest in adding the concept of “urban” and “planning” to various university curricula in Estonia, although these are generally small departments with few teaching staff.

Mutso: In the Estonian Academy of Arts we have faculties of architecture and urban planning and we believe that simultaneous instruction on these two topics is critical to understand their collaborative processes. Our young generation of architect-planners is very energetic and innovative, and excellent ideas are being generated through competitions where there are few limitations and creativity is encouraged.

Hess: Most students currently studying for their bachelor's degrees were born after Estonian independence in 1991. How does their experience with the legacy of the Soviet era shape their education about and interaction with the built environment?

Metspalu: Students today who were not alive during the Soviet era in Estonia have positive attitudes, and are not so focused on past events like the older generations.

Hiob: Agreed. It is refreshing to have a crop of young people with energy and new ideas, as many Estonians have mostly negative views of the Soviet period. In addition, students today have a broader worldview today than a generation ago, and they are well-traveled, unlike preceding generations whose travel was limited within the Soviet Union.

Kodres: In teaching art history, I have observed that students are quite interested in our Soviet past. For them, it appears as an exotic period and they are eager to know more about it.

Koov: We have a very heterogeneous legacy of the built environment in our cities, and the Soviet era is just one of many important periods. Of course, it is the latest period and, in some cases, produced expansive places (such as Lasnamäe or Annelinn). It is useful to teach students to observe and analyze urban space as an interconnected system. We have assigned several projects in which students are challenged to regenerate Soviet-era apartment block districts. We find that students tend to approach the issue abstractly and do not personalize the issues too much. I think the new generation does not feel embarrassment about the Soviet legacy; rather, they consider it to be an interesting historical layer of our built environment.



In 2010, bi-directional bicycle lanes were added to the existing median of Kesk Street, a multi-use boulevard that connects Karlova with the Tartu city center. Image by author.

Hess: Personal wealth has increased since the 1990s, especially for younger, educated, and non- Russian speaking individuals. How is this new wealth shaping the built environment in Estonia's cities, towns, and villages?

Preem: Various sociological research projects undertaken since 1980 showed that Estonian people prefer living in single-family houses more than multi-unit residences. But at the time, more than 80 percent of Estonians lived in apartment buildings. Since the late 1990s, the pace of construction of detached houses has increased rapidly. But without enough available space to build within the towns (such as Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu), housing construction took place on nearby greenfields—in other words, suburban sprawl. Next came various problems associated with sprawl: traffic congestion, inadequate public transport, and inadequate social infrastructure (kindergartens, health care facilities, etc.). Meanwhile, within the towns, developers continued to build apartment buildings, with mostly small flats. Now, however, developers are beginning to understand that, if they cannot build detached houses or rowhouses, there is a real need for bigger flats, ideally with private outdoor space.

Hess: Membership in the European Union brings resources, access to capital, and connections with Western Europe. How has/will membership in the European Union affect the built environments in cities?

Koov: The effect is, as of yet, not too overwhelming. There are some European architecture offices interested in entering the Estonian market, even though it is a relatively small market. A firm can raise its visibility by entering international competitions for big projects offering big money. On the other hand, Estonian companies can try to access the European market, through international design competitions and establishing other relations.





Linnahall, a sporting and entertainment center built at the water's edge in Tallinn, was built as a venue for the 1980 Moscow summer Olympic games and was formerly known as the Palace of Culture and Sports named after V.I. Lenin. An imposing concrete staircase leads to a viewing deck from which the Baltic Sea is visible; inside are a concert hall and ice skating rink.

Images by author.

Hess: Larger cities in Estonia (such as Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu) are usually structured as follows: a historic town center, surrounded by residential districts (historic pre-1920s wooden houses, 1920s-1930s garden suburbs, villas, modernist homes, Soviet-era tower blocks, post-Independence single family homes) each bearing trademarks of the era in which they were built and demonstrating the prevailing preferences and tendencies for density, style, materials, function, and access. How can designers work to connect these varied districts into comprehensible metropolitan areas?

Metspalu: Spatially, such districts are unconnected, and a person living in a certain district may have little or no reason to visit sites or access services in another district. This may, indeed, create compartmentalization in our cities. However, the city centers have remained strong as the cultural and administrative centers of regions. City centers also are the site of most dining, shopping, and entertainment, and all bus lines lead to the city center, so the places serve as common meeting ground for people throughout a region.

Hiob: Our historic districts built during various periods throughout the 20th century (and some from even earlier periods) possess very distinctive characteristics and identities. I see this as a strength of our built environment and social spaces. A distinctive identity is lacking, however, in our most recent suburban districts, built during the 1990s and 2000s, which are characterless places and add little to the fabric of our metropolitan areas.

Siilivask: This question gets to the heart of town planning and renovation practice. There is a need to change attitudes of town planners and urban designers (as well as local authorities, citizens and property owners) towards historic townscapes and built heritage. It is my experience that historical surveys of urban settlements and analyses of the re-use potential of historic structures—especially when undertaken collaboratively by town planners and architectural historians—will always help to rise the consciousness of local residents and other target groups. Publications about local built heritage and practical renovation guides are helpful as well.



The Golden Home (*Kuldne kodu*) micro-district, an industrial suburb near Pärnu, was built beginning in 1972 by the KEK Construction Company to house workers employed in the state building program.

Image by author.

Hess: Hundreds of thousands of people in Estonia live in cookie-cutter microdistricts (or *mikrorayon*) established during the Soviet era in Tartu (Annelinn), Tallinn (Lasnamäe, Mustamäe, Väike-Õismäe), and elsewhere. These districts—known for their generous street dimensions and mass-produced concrete uniformity—were built quickly between the 1960s and the 1990s as temporary structures to house industrial workers and immigrants. Russian speaking residents are over-represented in these districts, which held greater prestige during the Soviet era than they do now. What does the future hold for these districts?

Mutso: I am anxiously waiting for something to happen in these places. Although we have had architectural competitions to find solutions to improve these living environments, I think that most of the districts will have to be demolished. However, the concrete block buildings have turned out to be stronger than planned and will certainly last more than 20 years longer. But nobody yet has figured out a transformation plan for these districts.

Siilivask: Sooner or later (but certainly no later than 20 years from now) it will be understood that repairing these buildings (which unfortunately is the current mainstream practice in our building-renovation industry) has been meaningless. These buildings will undoubtedly fail. They are irreparable due to low-quality materials used during Soviet times and cheap construction methods. Despite the demand for “urban sustainability” and the fact that the districts are still occupied, I do not see any reason why we should prolong their functioning. The sooner we start to think about the possibilities of restructuring these districts, the better. Perhaps some exemplary structures could be kept.

It is much wiser to concentrate on the renovation of pre-1920s wooden buildings or pre-1940s buildings and districts. These environments are more sustainable and suitable for preservation due to their high-quality architectural character. One potential challenge for these older buildings, however, is a lack of energy sustainability. For example, improving thermo-insulation of buildings, which is required by the EU climate directive, is often done without respect for the appearance of buildings, without consideration for building integrity, and without sensitivity for the original construction materials that lie beneath the thermo-shell.

Koov: These districts are likely to survive for 30 to 50 years more and then progressively decline. Eventually they will be demolished and substituted with new buildings, or, if our population declines dramatically, large areas may be deserted. Until then, the districts provide a large workspace for landscape architects who can improve outdoor facilities like playgrounds, pathways, and gathering spaces.

Hiob: Interestingly, the mikrorayon derive from the British conception of neighborhood unit planning, in this case adopted for Soviet ideology. However, the modernist principles—the production of standardized apartment blocks that are easy to produce and readily replicated—that governed the production of mikrorayon resulted in enormous failures; the application of cubist principles to determine living environments produced, in the end, inhuman environments. The districts needed a large amount of undeveloped space and so they were situated at the far reaches of towns. Realistically, we cannot demolish them in large numbers and replace them with new housing. Therefore, improvements to the districts must be implemented gradually. But such improvements are undoubtedly needed.

Kodres: These structures will obviously remain with us for a long time, despite the poor infrastructure, since there are no opportunities for the residents to relocate. What is needed most are infrastructure improvements—transport and roads, shops, pubs, and cafes—and other “small things” that make the environment more “village-like”.

Preem: I do not believe these structures are at the end of their functional life, as the quality of their construction is quite good. During the Soviet era the state or local authorities owned all the flats, but now all living space is privately owned. Individual owners have begun to renovate their housing units, and larger-scale improvements—on the theme of energy savings—have been added to the buildings, including new roofs, new windows, upgraded heating systems, and new facades. A special state-run foundation, KredEx, which promotes energy efficiency in Estonia, will contribute about one-third of the costs of people’s home renovations.

Metspalu: In Tallinn, the mikrorayon continue to be looked upon favorably, even by Estonians. There are adequate services within the districts and good connections by public transit. Although people are generally content with their flats, the outdoor spaces are less attractive and parking, if available, is inconvenient. In terms of adaptation to improve livability, I saw interesting examples in East Berlin where the top several floors of apartment blocks were removed, shortening the buildings and thereby effectively reducing their overwhelming mass. This idea would be complicated in Estonia, however, because of mostly private ownership of individual flats (in East Germany, most of the units are state-owned and rented to families).

Hess: During the Soviet era, the concept of “neighborhood” was weak, as central planning sought to provide equal access to services throughout a city or region and the housing allocation system was intended to produce a homogeneous society and egalitarian outcomes in the housing market. Today, however, residents are free to live where they choose and many have shown enthusiasm for protecting and preserving historic residential districts that portray unique milieus. Will a more distinct notion of “neighborhood” strengthen social interaction and improve built environments?

Raagmaa: While there were groups interested in preserving the old towns of our cities during Soviet times, neighborhood or district identity was virtually absent before the 1990s. Now, neighborhood gentrification is an important trend. As young people move into pre-World War II districts, they establish neighborhood societies and work together to improve the districts.

Hess: There is a growing automobile presence in Estonia, despite high fuel prices and low road density in this small country. How can designers of the built environment provide appropriate scale and fabric that can satisfy both motorized and non-motorized transport?

Hiob: For many decades, planning for car traffic in Estonia favored automobiles and high traffic volumes, as it did in North America and elsewhere in Europe. In recent years, however, we have seen a shift in thinking, from Estonia’s Road Administration to local planners, to provide safer and more appealing travel environments for multi-modal traffic.

Metspalu: We have learned a great deal from our neighbors in Finland about planning roadways for “light traffic”—pedestrians and bicyclists. We have made many improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists, especially in small towns, however it is more difficult to separate these travel modes into separate “roadways” in denser built-up areas.

Koov: The solution is simple: narrow automobile lanes to half of their current capacity and redesign the remaining surface for walking and cycling routes. Where there are wider streets, park elements can replace former driving space and more streets in central areas can be converted to pedestrian zones. These ideas are not new, but recently there are proven outcomes in several European cities (and even New York City!). Automobile traffic is very adaptable, because the reduction of automobile travel lanes in central areas has not paralyzed traffic—even traffic engineers would agree. Requiring a reduction in driving forces us to look organically for other options, and this fills me with hope for more sustainable cities.



Garden of Arcadia (*Arkaadia aed*), a historic public space adjacent to the town wall in the center of the Town of Viljandi, was given a new interactive sculptural fountain in recent years. The town government is dissatisfied with the result and a re-design process has been initiated.

Image by author.

Hess: Feel free to offer additional thoughts not covered in the questions.

Koov: I hope that landscape architecture can solve some very important problems for future cities. It is a critical field that requires collaboration with other professionals. Landscape architecture alone has become a blurred profession: it has lost its credibility because it deals with both everything and nothing. But this comprehensiveness may again become its strength in effectively directing the profession and producing multidisciplinary solutions for a complex future.

In order to remake cities we have to start with the right questions. Creativity, inventiveness, ecological balance, and human-centered may be some important keywords for formulating a new approach.

Kodres: In my opinion, Estonia is still a rather typical post-Soviet country, living in between the inherited past and idealistically perceived future. There is still no clear “consciousness” on the state of contemporaneity, meaning that the ability to analyze the very complicated problematics of society and the program for the ways how to improve the situation, are missing. This seems to be not only characteristic to the field of architecture and design. One of the reasons, as I see it, will be the weakness of knowledge on how the capitalist society works, i.e. the basic knowledge in philosophy, sociology and economics. The architect’s identity is based on the concept of an individual creator.

Key Words: *architecture, built environment, education, Estonia, landscape architecture, town planning.*

Acknowledgement. When this research was conducted, Daniel B. Hess was a 2010-2011 Fulbright Scholar at Tallinn University of Technology—Tartu College. Mart Hiob and Epi Tohvri provided helpful advice.

Further Reading

Altrock, U., Günter, S., Huning, S, and Peters, D. (eds.) 2006. *Spatial Planning and Urban Development in the Ten New EU Member States*. London, UK: Ashgate.

Dimitrowska-Andrews, K. 2005. Mastering the Post-Socialist City: Impacts on Planning the Built Environment. in F.E.I. Hamilton, K. Dimitrowska-Andrews and N. Pichler-Milanovich. (eds.) *The Transformation of Cities in Central and Eastern Europe*. Tokyo, Japan: UNU Pres. pp.153-188.

Jaakson, R. 1996. From Marx to Market: Deciding the Urban Form of Post-Soviet Tallinn, Estonia. *Journal of Urban Design*. vol. 1. no. 3. pp.329-354.

Ruoppila, S. 2007. Establishing a Market-Oriented Urban Planning System After State Socialism: The Case of Tallinn. *European Planning Studies*. vol. 15. no. 3. pp.405-427.