

Miscellanea

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BIRTH OF A CITY FROM THE SPIRIT OF THE AUTUMN SCHOOL

On 19 to 21 October 2011, the first art history autumn school took place, which was called “This City and Another. From the Emajõgi Athens to Supilinn”. The forces that united to organise the event included the Chair of Art History at the University of Tartu (Juhan Maiste, Anu Ormisson-Lahe, Tõnis Tatar), the Tartu College of Tallinn University of Technology (Nele Nutt) and the Supilinn Society (Aliis Liin, Mart Hiob). Along with art historians, the other scholars that made presentations included philosophers, architects, semioticians, literary scholars, folklorists and psychologists. Distinction was added to the event by Professor Volli Kalm, the Rector of the University of Tartu, who opened the conference in the university auditorium, and President Toomas Hendrik Ilves who participated in the panel discussion.

In 1922, Oswald Spengler wrote: “What his house is to the peasant, the city is to civilised man.” Man in the historical era is an animal that builds cities, and all the great cultures are urban cultures. The existence of cities was a precondition for the development of nations and states, politics and religion, the arts and sciences. Since all thinkers in all cultures live in cities (even if they are physically located in the country), Spengler believes that they do not necessarily realise what a strange phenomena cities are: “We should view it with the amazed gaze of proto-man, who for the first time sees such a mass of stone or wood in the middle of the landscape, surrounded by streets and squares paved with stones, extraordinary surroundings teeming with people.”¹ Prof. Ülo Matjus, the

¹ Oswald Spengler, *Õhtumaa allakäik, II: Maailma-ajaloolised perspektiivid*, transl. by Mati Sirkel, Katre Ligi (Ilmamaa, 2012), 120–121.

opening speaker on the first day of the conference, seems to have taken this as a recommendation for methodological guidelines. As a philosopher, in his presentation Matjus approached cities phenomenologically by letting the city be heard, while avoiding preconceived and narrow definitions, and thereby letting it appear in all its concreteness. To achieve this, Matjus, on the one hand, examined the individual (“nostalgic”) relationship with Tartu as a hometown and, on the other hand, the city as it is revealed in literature. Matjus believes that the deeply hidden nature of the city and its specific relationship with its residents is revealed in linguistic etymological connections to the words “fortress”, “citadel” and “stronghold”. Accordingly, the relationship between a city and its citizenry is similar to the one between a mother and child – by holding her child in her arms, the mother restricts as well as protects, controls and shelters the child. Just like a relationship between mother and child, the relationship between a city and its citizenry is one of mutual respect, esteem and love. According to Matjus, in Estonian literature on the other hand, a strong differentiation between the city and the country and village appears that grows into confrontation and even hostility against the city. Hopes related to the city may not be realized. The catchphrase, which says that the city makes one free may not be true, but just be an empty metaphor. Thus, in classical Estonian literature, the city is only captivating and alluring from afar. Later it becomes hostile to the newcomer. Matjus interpreted this as a loss of the initial nature of the city – the city changes into something else, although externally, the definitive traits stay the same.

Interestingly, the mother-and-child image presented by Matjus was echoed by architect and professor, Vilen Künnapu, in his colourful presentation about the spiritual aspects of cities, when he said that Tartu’s basic layout resembles a mother holding her child. Künnapu’s presentation was based on the proposition that cities are quasi-biomorphic beings, in which a special spirit, *genius loci* is enlivened. For instance, according to this approach, there is an essential central axis or “backbone” that traverses the city, on which the settlement-based energy centres or chakras are located – the museums, monuments, schools and sculptures. With the help of his practical projects, Künnapu also demonstrated how the “pockets of disease” that develop in urban space can be remedied with sensitive planning (e.g. the building of energy towers).

Guided by the title of the programme – “This City and Another” – several of the presentations dealt with relationship between reality and utopia, between different stages of reality, as it is expressed in historical urban space. Kaur Alttoa, art historian, medievalist and expert on Tartu’s medieval architecture, who based his presentation on the historical principle of reality, started his sharp-witted presentation with the statement that romantic Toomemägi Hill in the heart of Tartu “was created by a commando of Russian engineers”. However, the truly great event for medieval Tartu was the destruction of Visby by the Danes in 1361 – an event to which Tartu was indebted for the majority of its medieval glory, since as a result of this event, an important part of Hanseatic trade started moving through Tartu. Another lucky day for Tartu, according to Alttoa, was the great fire of 1775, since it thwarted the plans of the Tsarist Russian rulers to make the town into a fortified town and made it possible to restore the University of Tartu in 1802. However, the city itself became an important junction between Russia and Europe, which was reflected in its conservative architecture. However, at the beginning of the 19th century, Toomemägi Hill, which had been used as a pasture and dump after the fire, provided space for Johann Wilhelm von Krause, the architect of the University of Tartu, to establish a park and construct university buildings.

In his presentation, Dr. Roman Hillmann partially dealt with urban planning in the same period as Alttoa, based on the example of Berlin. Berlin is a city that changed significantly during the Enlightenment, which was also an important era from Tartu’s point of view. Berlin, which had previously been a town similar in size to Tartu, became the capital of Prussia in 1701, and between 1670 and 1800, underwent large-scale functional modernisation. According to Hillmann, the Enlightenment-era town planning in Berlin observed a maxim that has been attributed to Frederick the Great – the Kaiser’s underlings could think and do what they wanted, as long as they fulfilled his orders. The ideology that ruled Berlin town planning until the French Revolution was exacting as far as the implementation of general policies, but was accepting of freedom and tolerance within this framework. Hillmann also spoke about laws and regulations, and the citizenry’s spontaneous striving for freedom and another city (for instance, the Jewish quarter) that contradicted them.

Chronologically, Kaur Alttoa was followed by art historian Dr. Tiina-Mall Kreem, who spoke about the problematic realisation of architectural

visions based on the example of Estonia's 19th-century ecclesiastical architecture. Mainly for financial reasons (the Tsarist state did not support the building of Lutheran churches, as it Orthodox churches), the execution of many of the buildings was more modest than originally planned. A positive idea highlighted by Kreem was the fact that the quality of the churches and their furnishings was less important to the congregations than saving souls and supporting their members. Therefore, we are dealing with more of an "academic problem" of architectural history than a disappointment for people at the time. According to Kreem, the question of whether to base the evaluation of ecclesiastical architecture on the ideas and designs of the architect, the structure that was built despite the hindrances, or what has actually happened to the building after all the historical disruptions, is a methodological question related to the examination of and approach to architectural history. And the answers depend on the readiness of society to listen to architects (living and dead).

Emil M. Cioran has written that the development of civilisation proceeds from agriculture to paradox.² The paradoxes related cities particularly came to the fore in the presentations that approached the topic from the viewpoint of utopias. Prof. Lilian Hauser provided a survey of utopian ideas through the history of town planning. She said that duality is characteristic of utopias – on the one hand they focus on the future, but on the other, on the past. Utopias balance on the edge between imagination and reality by maintaining a tension between harmony and conflict, a balance between the past and the future. She believes that, historically, radical ideas inspired by utopian ideas have been most enthusiastically launched at the beginnings of new political, social and town planning periods. Therefore, utopian ideas in town planning are also related to the reigning power, by giving an aesthetic form to the implementation of social and political ideas. According to Hansar, the design of ideal cities has always been subordinated to strict geometry and symmetry, and the symbolic order created thereby is meant to ensure the ideal functioning of the city. The common element of utopian urban visions, Hansar said, is an orientation toward the smooth functioning of the social body and not toward people's happiness. They do not inclu-

² Emil M. Cioran, *Lagunemise lühikursus*, transl. by Leena Tomasberg (Vagabund, 2002), 164.

de aspirations for a society that would be good place for people to live, but the people are to be shaped by the template of the utopian society.

Semiotician Anti Randviir also spoke about the nature of utopia. He stated that early utopias were alternative or parallel spaces, which were phenomena similar to other phenomena, such as paradise, Eldorado, the land of spices. Later some of these utopias become realities, and some did not. Therefore, Randviir states that utopianism is context-sensitive, since it depends on the community and its beliefs. Utopia is more a multifaceted phenomenon than just a certain fantastical building style – the spatial dimension is only a means for creating an alternative socio-cultural vision. The fact that there is no sense in giving utopia a spatial-architectural form without dealing with the socio-cultural system as a whole was demonstrated by 20th-century modernist city planning. If the social dimension is ignored, utopias become dystopias.

Dr. Eva Närepea's presentation, which dealt with heterotopias, also touched on the subject of urban utopias, and did so based on Estonian cinematography. If a utopia is the ideal image of society, or conversely, an unreal space, a heterotopia is another space, a kind of contra-space or effectively implemented utopia, which simultaneously represents the discredited places that actually exist in inverted societies. These places are located outside of all places, even when their actual location is known. Närepea believes that, among other things, this provides a useful perspective for examining the depiction of cities in Estonian films. Thus, she pointed to the heterotropic time-spaces, to the imaginary geography of blended contradictory time and space layers created in films made during the Soviet era; for example, the creation of a yearning for the interwar independence period as a compensatory withdrawal from the Soviet reality.

According to Oswald Spengler, the city is place where people perceive the country as something different and secondary. The country and urban denizens are two different beings, who finally do not understand each other. Compared to the dull and settled (but vital) country, the city is characterised by liveliness, self-awareness, freedom and security. "There, separated from the power of the land and landscape, as if cut off from it by the paving under one's feet, existence is weakened, while perception and insight are strengthened. [...] The mind is an ur-

ban form of clever wakefulness.”³ Apparently, the concept of the city is comprised of many gradations, because, in Supilinn – Tartu’s wooden working class area, which was also a recurring theme of the Autumn School – this separation from the power of the landscape has not been achieved, and the sharp contrast between the residents and the rural surroundings has also not developed. As we know, this is a district where the buildings are often organically crooked and rundown; the unpaved streets are named after vegetables; and there are no cafés. A totally different urban background was represented at the conference by Zenia Kotval from Chicago and Tallinn art historian Andres Kurg. In a presentation titled “European Influences on American City Planning”, Kotval said that the influences reached their zenith in the 19th and 20th centuries, when European city planning had a great impact on the United States, especially in regard to the building of transportation networks, canals, public city parks, etc. However, in the middle of the 20th century, there was a transition from the utopian model to the regulation-based model. This was accompanied by the modernisation of cities in the 1960s – old districts were demolished and replaced with functional hygienic quarters. However, recently, doubts have been raised about these modernist projects and Americans look admiringly at European-style culturally rich urban spaces. In summary, Kotval believes that initially lessons were learned from the Europeans’ mistakes (industrial cities), but thereafter, they themselves made many mistakes (urban settlement patterns, lifestyles, consumerism).

Andres Kurg supplemented Kotval’s presentation with a survey of the newest trends in European urban planning. His attention was focused on the cultural revolution that has occurred during the regeneration of cities in the last few decades, and in which the arts have played a significant role in urban development, the rehabilitation of industrial areas, etc. According to Kurg, this is a reaction to the mass society and uniform modern urban space of the 1960s and 70s, and aspires to fight alienation with flexibility, autonomy, excitement and diversity. Kurg says that the development of such post-industrial cities is to a certain extent autonomous of political history. For instance, in Estonia it started before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Kurg did not present a hypothesis related to the revolution in the perception of cities as a description of place and

³ Spengler, *Õhtumaa allakäik*, 122.

the socio-political shakeup at the end of the 1980s. For instance, Václav Havel has stated that the neighbourhoods filled with panelised housing built by the Soviet authorities as a “gift” throughout Eastern Europe played a role in launching the “revolution”.⁴

The second day of the Autumn School was dedicated to the identity problems of the Supilinn neighbourhood in Tartu. In his discussion with urban planner Mart Hiob, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves raised the issue of the historical role played by voluntary organisations in the shaping of society. He said that the creation of the Estonian state and the restoration of independence both got their start from civil movements. Ilves also said that many of the professional politicians that emerged in the 1990s were originally voluntary activists. Ilves expressed his support for community initiatives, for people taking care of their own affairs, instead of waiting for help to come from above. If Hiob expressed the opinion that there could be some channels for political activity other than just party politics with its tarnished reputation, Ilves maintained that good people with strong sense of just should still become candidates and run for office.

Architects Ülar Mark and Kaja Pae weighed the relationship between people and the city in neighbourhoods with panelised housing and historical areas. They recognised the inevitable impact space has on guiding social practices. The people in the panelised neighbourhoods are not activated because spaces that have a collective effect minimise the power of the individual. There is not interest in dealing with the common living space or establishing a relationship with it. Kaja Pae spoke about her experiences organising urban forums in panelised neighbourhoods: few people attended and the people believed that someone else should improve the environment from the outside. The residents did not feel attached to the environment, and therefore, had no urge to do anything. Otherwise passive people only react when outside forces threaten to impact their lives in unpleasant ways. The thought that resonated from the architects’ presentations was the fact that the wish to change something must come from the people themselves. If the residents of the residential areas want to improve their surroundings, then others can come to their aid.

⁴ Neil Leach, *Architecture and Revolution* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

The self-determination of Supilinn residents was discussed by psychologist Aune Valk and folklorist Anzori Barkalaja, based on a survey conducted among the neighbourhood's residents. The identity of the Supilinn residents depended to a great extent on how long the person has lived in Supilinn. A certain role is also played by the location of one's dwelling within the district – when living on the edge of the district, the adjacent district also affects one's self-determination. To counterbalance Pae and Mark's presentation somewhat, Valk formulated her observation that children in the panelised neighbourhoods have greater interaction and play in the public space more than children in the suburbs.

Literary scholar Mart Velsker spoke about the treatment of the Supilinn and Karlova neighbourhoods in Estonian literature. In literature, Karlova appears more ennobled and urban than Supilinn – people there deal with culture and drink wine. The picture of Supilinn in the literary landscape is different – a space that is ravaged by depravity, poverty and floods, but is also poetic. Instead of culture, people here deal with love and having fun, and they drink vodka. Supilinn has left a deep impression on Estonian literature, and its coefficient of literature depictions, according to Velsker, is the highest of all neighbourhoods. At the end of the second day, Mehis Heinsaare read some surrealistic stories about Supilinn, and Enn Lillemets recited his poetry.

The city functions like a theatrical stage, and among many other things, theatres are also a kind of city models. In an essay comparing the phenomena of cities and theatres, Vilen Künnapu has written the following: "Let's compare for a moment the small insane asylum within the large insane asylum, or city, surrounding it, and we see that the small one is second to the large one. It does not have as much power, vitality, flexibility, density or diversity."⁵ The long weekend of the art history autumn school concluded with a merging of city and theatre, or an attempt to stage the city, which was directed by producer Neeme Kuningas from the Estonian National Opera. The performance took place at the History Museum of the University of Tartu, in the historical Cathedral building. After the participants had been sent out into the city with specific assignments and returned, Kuningas staged skits on the various ways of perceiving a city based on the material they collected.

⁵ Vilen Künnapu, *Linn kui teater, teater kui linn. Üle punase jõe. Valitud tekste 1972–2001* (Tallinna Tehnikakõrgkool, 2001), 111.

Finally, according to Spengler, the birth of a city's soul is truly miraculous. According to him, a city and a village are not differentiated as much by size as by the existence of a soul – there are very large settlements that are not cities for this reason. “It suddenly separates from the general soul of its culture as a totally new kind of great soul, the reasons for which remain a secret forever. Awakened, it forms a visible body. From a village-type collection of farms – each of which has its own history – a whole develops. And this whole lives, breathes, grows, and acquires a face, an internal form and history. From thereon, in addition to individual houses, temples, cathedrals, the cityscape as a whole is an object of the idiom of form and history of style, which accompanies culture throughout its lifespan.”⁶ Among other things, Tartu has been disparagingly called “a bowl-shaped fishing village”. Despite its almost thousand-year history, and a great and respected university, the city is still small. There are few people; much of the destruction from the war has yet to be replaced. The winters are long and connections to the rest of the world are poor. It may seem that a sensitive person needs a thicker skin in order to live here than some other place. Or more imagination. In any case, whether due to the interesting presenters, having the topic touch a timing nerve, or the synergy created by uniting the Chair of Art History at the University of Tartu, the Tartu College of the Tallinn University of Technology and the Supilinn Society, the first Autumn School was remarkably well attended. Sometimes, art historians' autumn schools become traditions, in which the spirit of the scholars, students and citizenry contributes to the recreation of the urban soul and a world of urban visions in that place.

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⁶ Spengler, *Õhtumaa allakäik*, 121.

