

OUTSIDERS' PERSPECTIVE



Sketches for the outer walls.
Image: Võru Linnaleht

VÕRU'S PACIFIER

GREGOR TAUL, *the head and curator of EKA G gallery*

On the 15th of January 2013 the city government of Võru posted the following information with an illustrative image on their web page:

“In relation to the discussions emerging about the lighting of the water tower, it came up that a lot of our buildings do not have a beautiful appearance and Võru town has decided to offer house owners and housing associations, who are willing to insulate their houses, the chance to use drawings by our own artist Navitrolla (www.navitrolla.ee) on their facade. The aim of using the pictures is to diversify the image of the city and add individuality. The city offers Navitrolla's drawings for free, the only condition is insulating the houses, in order not to ruin the job done later. When the house has been insulated, we kindly ask you to turn to the city government to agree upon which image you wish to use and when the painting can start. Those interested can choose themselves which drawing they want to have on their house. The given picture illustrates some thoughts, the rest of the pictures can be found on Navitrolla's Facebook”

The message spread like wildfire and on the 2nd of February it had 3061 likes, 1338 had shared it on their wall and 191 had added a supportive comment.

Covering blank walls with pictures is a classical pseudo-solution that helps to divert attention from something more important. It is like fixing torn wallpaper with post cards or giving a pacifier to a crying baby. The pacifier paralyses any creative impulses the baby might have, silences curiosity and averts development, as it deprives the little person from stimuli to independently handle diverse situations. From two competing forces – the creative instinct and the desire to own – the pacifier puts the emphasis on the second. People of Võru should not agree with the pacifier called Navitrolla, instead of going with a half-ready solution they should look the truth in the face together and articulate the larger problem that they are facing. The question is not about a few ugly façades, but about managing the socialist heritage: what to do with the housing estates the state built after the war?

This is not a burning question only in Estonia, but elsewhere in Eastern and Western Europe. The latter have it much easier as the social democratic decisions made then are also the responsibility of current governments. In Eastern Europe those who built the panel housing are gone, new governments, especially exemplary in Estonia, do not think of housing as being part of their

1. www.facebook.com/pages/Navitrolla/290172384374085

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responsibility. The responsibility is placed on the owners and housing associations and sometimes also on local government.

There are a number of local solutions that have been offered in the form of thorough analyses to the question. An inspiring example is the landscaping solution offered for Seminar street's linear park² in Rakvere. (B210, NU arhitektuur, Karisma), according to which a gaunt city centre street pinning between panel housing will be redeveloped into a human-centric park-size urban space. A relevant example is also the fantastic small town of Cēsis which during summer brings together urbanists from Latvia and other parts of the world to solve urban issues with installations, visionary projects, work groups, etc. Maybe an initiative like that could also work in Võru? The future of panel housing is also a topic of the Tallinn's Architecture Biennial³, that focuses on recycling socialism ("Recycling Socialism").⁴

The case of Võru is translucent and even boring: the year of local government elections has started, the citizens are promised a varied array of "free meals", there is an artist with a good eye for sales, somewhere are the officials who have the skill to point out the "additional value", etc. It is unlikely that the people of Võru are not able to see through this "election scheme" and we can't blame them for being a fan of a popular artist, but the emergency light should be lit at least in the head of the Head Architect of the city, Ülevi Eljand, who has it in his capabilities to point out to the officials that while it is ok for a boss to reward employees with little pictures at random company functions, the obligations of the county centre (that is, both in terms of geography as well as logistics, a border city) leaders towards their citizens are much higher.

Actually a giant painting is a bad idea in principle here, considering the climate. The paint would stay fresh for a few years and would then start to fade exponentially. The bright colours characteristic to Navitrolla's paintings would suffer especially quickly. What would the city government of Võru do with the fading works of art in five years? Would they cover them with a new coat of paint? Would there be new paintings? Would that again be for free? These are all technical BUTs. Another, but even more relevant BUT is related to the questions of urban space and the aesthetic side of monumental art. First of all the understanding that a painting with measurements of 100x50 cm can just like that be blown up 30 times and painted on the wall and that's it, is artistically inadequate. It is not like that.

Monumental painting is a site specific genre in which certain aesthetic decisions will work on a chosen wall (the subject matter, technique, motive, the level of generalisations, etc.). The attitude with which the city of Võru justifies covering the panel houses with Navitrolla's paintings, by the mere fact that he was born in Võru, does not differ in its nature from the indifference that the Soviet power covered one sixth of the planet with panel housing. Ironic, but the city government of Võru is re-validating panel-cities.

Instead of borrowing an image from Navitrolla, the small town triggered by it's history should come up with something much more fruitful. The suitable landscape is there for it: there are a number of strong industrial enterprises, active cultural facilities in the city, such as the city gallery, city theatre, a cinema and *Võru Kannel* (local culture centre – eds.) with a good program. In a situation where, while integrating panel housing with the rest of the urban fabric, half-ready solutions are used, the money designated for murals

2. See: www.b210.ee/rakvere-seminari-tanava-lineaarpark/

3. www.tab.ee

4. Also read article "TAB210" by Anna-Liisa Unt in U13.

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could be used for solving more urgent issues. How many homeless people are there in Võru? Could we count them on two hands, find housing and bring them back to the job market? How many families live below the poverty line? How to help them? Do disabled people have access to the necessary institutions?

If the project is, despite all of the above, continued, one of the following solutions could be considered: a) to consult the architecture and construction department of Tartu City Government (Annelinn has experience with tasteful super-graphics, for example painting Anne street 55 with illustrations from books by artists Jaan Vahtra and Ado Vabbe – artists, who were popular when Annelinn was built – are used for beautification; Kaunase avenue 19 end wall fittingly refers to the dividing wall next to it); b) to organise a public competition for every wall that has been insulated, thereat the expenses could be kept low by making the competition with invitation and the participants could be artists from Võrumaa such as Albert Gulk, Leonhard Lapin, Anna Hints, Marja-Liisa Plats, Andrus Raag, Kristina Viin, or Peeter Laurits, who is one of the few who has worked with monumental art in Võru – there is a 100 m² photo mural “Lõunõhumogumaa” in the shopping centre.

In conclusion – what is a house? First of all it is a place where people and ideas gather and find shelter. Society as such finds its realisation in a house. Apartment buildings are especially good examples of locations that have been created in consideration of the interests and ideals of society. I tend to think that the relationships between humans and ideas can be to a certain extent curated and made better – in order to do that we need to look into a house intensively, to find and map problems and create an action plan for reaching a better situation. Painting the walls means that the inhabitants have to leave the house. Instead of creating post-card houses (almost for condolences) we should be thinking about how to make a house in the community more societal and shared. A solution could be hidden in a rooftop garden or a garden plot next to the house or a shared sauna built in the attic, a club space or something else. Anyway, good people of Võru, please let go of the city government's plan and make it a base for thinking together about "what is a house and what should it be like".

U's COMMENT:

The text was originally published in February 2013. In July 2013 we can say, that Võru apartment cooperatives reacted coldly towards Town's preposition⁵, even considered it to be a waste of money⁶. Arved Breidaks from Võru town told U that at the moment the project is in an ready-to-go stage. There are four apartment houses that wished for their house to be painted. The painting works are expected to begin during the next two weeks. Breidaks claimed that the result will be there for everyone to see on Võru days taking place from the 17th to the 20th of August. More information about the project is available in the interview with Navitrolla and the mayor of Võru⁷.



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5. www.vorumaateataja.ee/index.php/ee/arhiiv/60-uidised/6900-voru-uhistuid-jatavad-navitrolla-seinapil-did-kulmaks

6. www.vorumaateataja.ee/index.php/ee/kuulutused/63-viimased-uidised/6430-korte-riuhistud-peavad-navitrolla-algatust-raharaiskamiseks

7. www.eestielu.delfi.ee/article.php?id=66029876