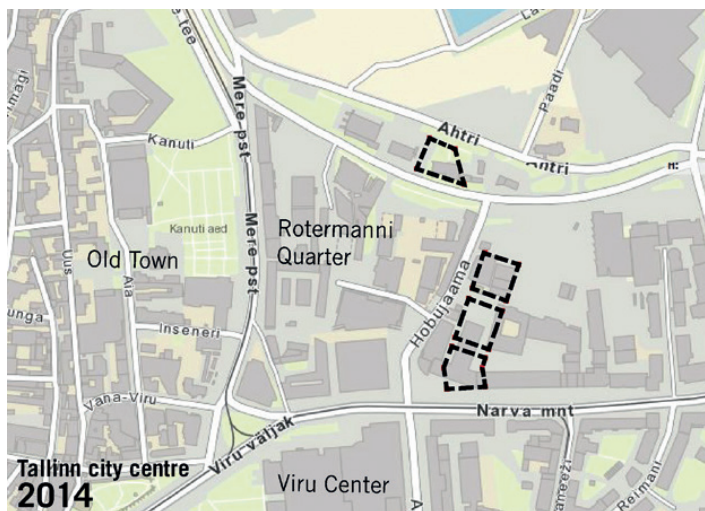


OBSERVATION



Maps by Regina Viljasaar.

UNFINISHED SOCIALIST 'AUTOPIAS'

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This article offers some insights into another aspect of unfinished socialism. Drawing from the material that emerged as a by-product of my doctoral research on post-socialist parking politics in Tallinn¹, the article considers the complications of seeing the Soviet era as 'socialist' or as necessarily different from the 'West'. The point in discussion here are spaces of the automobile.

The private automobile is hardly the element that is seen as characteristic of socialist cities. Rather, space designed for the mass use of this transport mode conjures up images of cities in the USA, Oceania or Western Europe. Similarly, the end of the Soviet Union marked the increase of car ownership and use in Estonia and among other former Soviet societies, whereas the importance of public transport concomitantly dropped. Yet, while the trend is unquestionable, there are numerous instances when the Soviet urban planning positioned access for cars in an important position. A motorway and a large parking garage – the examples here – are both associated with the ideological dominance of private cars in the West. American historian Cotten Seiler in his book 'Republic of Drivers' shows how the ideology in the USA positioned the construction of motorways as characteristic of American freedom in opposition to the socialist restrictions on cars. Yet, mass-scale car spaces emerged also in socialist societies, even if just in visions.

Of course, the existence of those ideas might not mean much. It could just signify how modernism has swept all over the world, with similar ideas taken up in Western Europe, the USA as well as in the Soviet Union. However, that would not capture the whole meaning of those (imaginary) spaces. Eventually, it is interesting that a Soviet society was dealing with the problem of accommodating car traffic while the level of individual car use was minuscule and the ideological position of cars controversial. Moreover, when the Soviet era ended, and car use increased significantly with the ideology of private car ownership much more explicit and vocal than in the Soviet time, the city government did not follow up on the plans devised under the conditions of socialism. This lays at least partial support to an assertion that private automobiles had an

important position in the imaginations of urban planning also under the Soviet collective ideology. We need to be careful, therefore, in assuming a clear-cut distinction of socialist urban thinking from the rest of the world.

Parking garages in the city centre

In late 1970s and early 1980s, the city of Tallinn considered the expansion of public transport in the city centre.² The idea was to introduce a high-speed tram system with stations positioned underground. However, the same plans (from 1978 and 1983) also recommended the construction of large multi-storey parking garages in the centre. The picture above four such four-storey buildings with 400 parking spaces right next to where the contemporary main shopping area in the city centre is. The Soviet plan actually recommended more parking spaces in parking garages than there is in that area today (despite the large facilities that the shopping centres have constructed to accommodate cars). The plan also recommended numerous other multi-storey parking garages which all remained unfinished in the Soviet era.

2. Eesti Riigiarhiiv.
ERA.T-14.4-6.3978. Kompleksnaja
Transportnaja Shema Tallina (1978).

A proposed motorway in a housing estate (Mustamäe)

It is widely known that socialist cities were urbanised by adding large-scale pre-fabricated housing estates. Much less considered is their traffic planning. However, it is in regard to this aspect that interesting connections occur with older 'Western' planning ideas such as Clarence Perry's 'neighbourhood unit' (1929) or Le Corbusier's 'Ville Radieuse' (1933). The fragment of a plan³ (below left) depicts the neighbourhood planning structure similar to that presented by Perry: namely, internal roads are planned for limited traffic while arterial roads surrounding the trapezoidal living area have to accommodate an extended amount of car traffic. The roads meandering between apartment buildings could be seen as forms of cul-de-sacs. But even more significant than these is a motorway shown on the upper part of the picture. This urban motorway was planned to connect different parts of the city but has been left unconstructed to its full extent imagined in the 1960s. The contemporary four-lane road in that location is a mere feeder road of the initial plan. Similar motorways and multi-level junctions were proposed in other parts of the city but these have largely remained unconstructed.

3. Eesti Riigiarhiiv.
ERA.T-14.4-6.8748. 'Tallinna Mustamäe IV Mikrorajooni Hoonestamise Eskiisprojekt' (1964).

