



ALTERNATIVE IS OUT

Tactics for getting to know a city

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Can you remember the board game „A Journey Round the World“⁴¹ from your childhood? This game had little to do with the world or travelling, as it really taught basic skills that are needed for life, such as **elementary maths** and how to experience the beautiful state of **random fortune**. The game was enthralling probably for completely other reasons.

The possibility to travel around the world is here today more than ever. Visiting foreign towns is sometimes just as an easy as throwing dice. In a foreign city people often find their way to someone or something third, who and what guides them around. Usually these people are called **guides**, the things **maps** and the actions **urban excursions**. The ‘don’t miss’ sights are elementary; **calculating the number of inhabitants** and a **random guide** and a choice by a good fortune – definitely informative, but where is the playfulness, that something that engages?

As a reader of U, you already understand the joys of cities and how, even in our home towns, there are places that you must make an effort to awaken to and notice. An excursion is built on **passive communication**: listening to and looking at the guide. The guide knows. There is also an array of other ways of getting to know a city. Firstly of course are the friends of friends, their personal stories, networked volunteers, ‘like a local guide’, and other excursions stressing the alternative. But the way we sense the representation of a city (through excursions or other mediated actions) has much to do with the **choices** that our local sense considers important **in the process of evaluating sights**.

Each of us has a certain image of their hometown that is not always consciously, but often carefully **constructed for the outside world**. This perceptive, which can be alternative or local, refers to agreed upon authenticity, but it leaves out **nuances, shadow sides, the boring and the mundane**. These progressions of projections can be cultivated endlessly in an urban space – architectural wonders as exhibits of the open air-urban museum, as fragmented decorations next to each other, and all those contemporary and future fetishised **objects that you have to see**. Isn’t it so, that for some reason people love to photograph architecture and urban space without people, as a separate artefact, despite the fact that the space is used, houses are lived in and the real life of even most photogenic object is ruled by the mundane. I have many of those photos.

1. Also known as Ludo.

OPINION

Leaving the “professional cretinism” and analysis of desires aside, and looking for something beyond a sequence of uniform spaces and **texts memorized by guides, prepossessions** and **‘the tourist gaze’**, it is possible to find many options in the practice of learning about the contemporary city. Namely, one can seek practices that redefine that sort of ‘consumption’. We are back to that ‘something’ that is simultaneously engaging and informative.

For example in Berlin, it is possible to discover secrets of places on **photo-tours**² to abandoned factories, closed fairgrounds and former hospitals, where permission to enter is a gray area. In Sydney, Barcelona and several other cities, **architecture is introduced by the architects** themselves³. Well-known is the **Open House**⁴ conception, which introduces exceptional built environments and urban space in many cities across the world completely free of charge. Looking at the titles of tours, it is refreshing to see that in addition to ‘wow-architecture’, people have started to turn their attention to **details**. For example under the aegis of Open House and during the World Design Capital, a “Font tour”⁵ and a “Brick Tour”⁶ took place in Helsinki (yes, really, fonts and bricks!).

In Estonia these approaches are more likely to be exceptions. In the tourism sector, you can find experience-tourism, official town excursions and opposing entertainment tours. This kind of **place marketing** is attracting external capital. A concrete place with its distinguished social, cultural and physical parameters becomes an important criterion in the globalization of production and increased mobility of capital. The **entrepreneurial cities** around the world are using local urban cultural landscapes strategically (mega-events, festivals, conferences in special locations creating **extra value** in choosing a place to live). Identity-based entertainment zones such as an old and graceful merchant town’s queer space mark internationality, open-minded attitudes, tolerance and diversity for visitors. Identity is the main tool for re-creation as places of culture and consumption that **meet the desires of the executive and the white-collar worker-consumer**. Smaller towns and urban regions tend to be less armed in the **war of the creative capital**⁷. This means that it is hard to compare Helsinki and Tallinn in that respect.

But **Tallinn’s representation**, opted by several public opinions, speaks of a space of contrasts – a wooden house next to a shiny high-rise. Here as well, many exiting short-term actions take place to introduce the city. For example one event critically redefined the format of an excursion and carried out social theatre.⁸ Or elsewhere in Estonia, for example in Tartu, where while visiting the unknown city with authors, a book presentation was played out⁹. Exciting urban wanderings are offered by the side-programmes of conferences (E.g Tallinn Architecture Biennale and Urban and Landscape Days) and local organisations (Estonian Urban Lab Linnalabor¹⁰ and Estonian Centre of Architecture¹¹).

“Alternative” has not been an exciting buzzword for some time. People interested in cities are attracted to **temporary, interdisciplinary** and maybe even **chance-lead events**. Fixed authenticity and memorised urban narrative is not producing new knowledge, but enforces the incapability of representations to create additional value. An area’s local history and culture is made available and transformed into a resource for local economic and social development within a globally evolving economy and society¹². Those kinds of tactics are actively used by all sorts of initiatives introducing the city. Today it is really possible to travel around the world, without throwing the dice, affected by that ‘something’, **playfully**. In order that **smart choices has been made**.

2. PHOTO-TOURS “GO2KNOW”.
MORE INFO: www.go2know.de

3. SYDNEY ARCHITECTURE WALKS:
www.sydneymararchitecture.org
BARCELONA ARCHITECTURE WALKS:
www.mielarquitectos.com/baw

4. SEE MORE:
www.openhouseworldwide.org

5. SEE MORE:
www.wdchelsinki2012.fi/en/program/2011-10-11/font-walk

6. OPEN HOUSE HELSINKI PROGRAMME:
www.openhousehelsinki.fi/2011/index_eng.htm

7. RICHARD FLORIDA’S THEORY ON CREATIVE CLASS:
Florida, R. Cities and the Creative Class, Florida, R. (2003), pg.143-149 - City Reader (1996), Richard T., LeGates and Frederic Stout (ed.), 5th ed., NY:Routledge.

8. PLAY by Theatre N099,
“Tallinn - our city”
www.no99.ee/lavastused.php?nid=55

9. URBAN WALKS DURING PRIMA VISTA (*annual literature festival in Tartu*):
www.kirjandusfestival.tartu.ee/mitte-tartu-linnaretked

10. <http://www.linnalabor.ee/tegevus/70>

11. <http://www.arhitektuuriakeskus.ee/ekskursioonid/arhitektuurituurid/>

12. Urry, J. (1995). *Reinterpreting Local Culture - Consuming Places*, pg.152 London:Routledge.