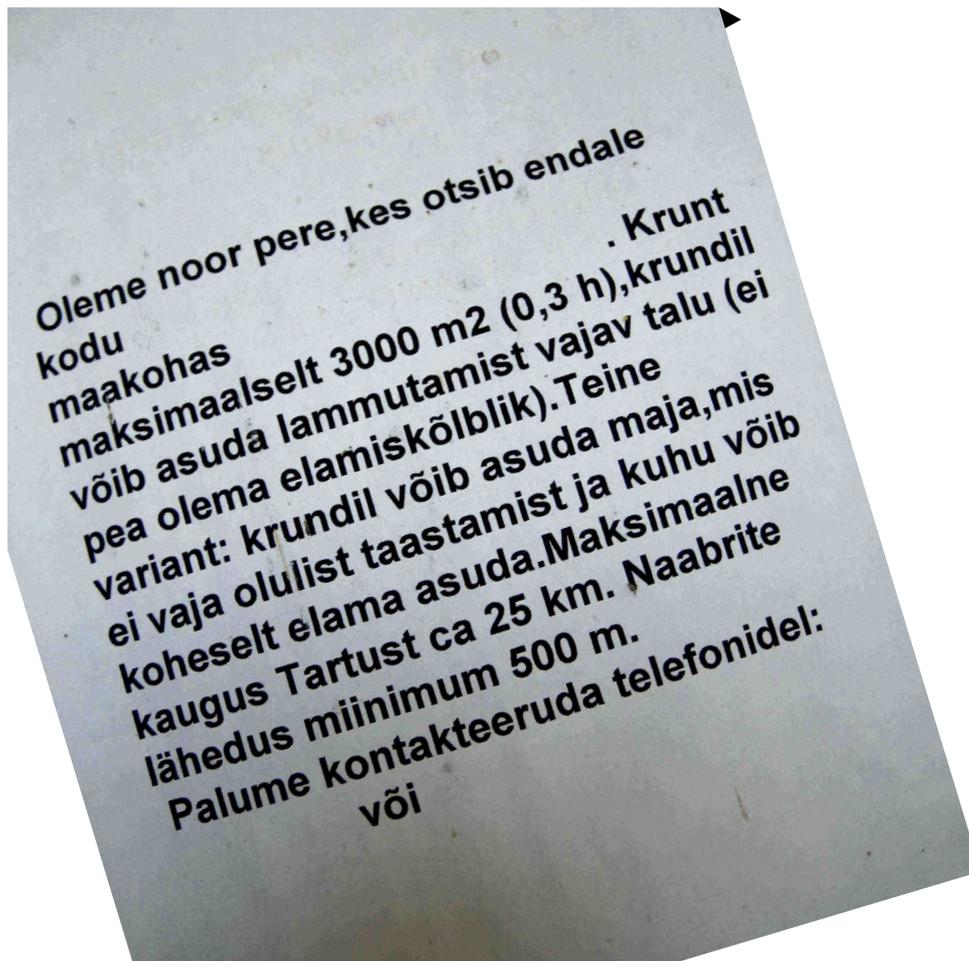


Photo: Kristi Grišakov



A DIALOGUE ABOUT SPACE: SOME ATTITUDES AND NOTIONS

The project Good Governance of the Estonian Co-operation Assembly invited the Urban Lab to join it in reflecting on what kind of a state we want and can afford; so that we have a state where people want to live and the supporting machinery is slimmer and clearer.

Our task is to deal with space and community. The following conversation is the beginning of a discussion in order to disentangle space-related concerns, fixed notions and attitudes on how we handle space. Both our state and our living space primarily represent values that are important to us and through them, they also represent who we are and who we want to become. We will try to look beyond temporary solutions that have the effect of cosmetic filler injections and begin at a cellular level, where the stem values and misunderstandings shaping our living environment lie. It is only through formulating and understanding them that a clearer and more substantial primary task can be formulated, enabling us to envision a new (spatial) future in a more open way.

The dialogue takes place between Kristi Grišakov and Kadri Koppel.

PRIVATE PROPERTY

Kristi: In addition to our school education, many of our modes of behaviour go back to what we experience in our childhood and whether we later define these experiences as positive or negative. Someone who grew up in a private house with a large garden will often want to raise his or her children in a similar environment. However, for others, the additional responsibilities that accompanied a private house were too much and in the future, they prefer the more comfortable apartment in the city centre. Often we do not explain or analyse how these personal standards are formed. Why are we really obsessed with living in a private house with a garden when we're starting a family or why is it necessary to own a summer house in addition to a flat? Considering our lifestyle and future trends, perhaps a different solution would be better?

At the same time, for the people at the top of Maslow's hierarchy (people whose basic needs such as food and safety are taken care of), their home has long been more than just a practical and needs-based shelter. Our home indicates our social affiliation and standing, its size, appearance and location provide the careful observer with an initial impression of our values and lifestyle. This way, in different periods, different trendy city districts (at the moment, for instance, it's the wooden house areas like Kassisaba or Kalamaja) and different architectural styles (e.g. building neofunctionalist villas for the nouveau successful Estonians) are fashionable among people looking for a home. Through the choice of our place of residence we position ourselves as a member of a geographical as well as ideological community.

After joining a community (e.g. an apartment building and/or neighbourhood), the positioning of yourself as an individual begins again. Admittedly on a much smaller scale. Now, the differences in lifestyles and tastes, which stand out well in a smaller environment, begin to collide. There will be regulations on the general appearance of the community and attempts to solve discords. All this is perfectly normal in our democratic society. Comparing to Western countries, the only difference is that they have had several decades more to practice and therefore, the balance between obligations and responsibility has gotten more on track over there.

Since in the Estonian context, the concept of your home extending beyond your walls and fence is relatively novel, and takes getting used to, there are two main areas of responsibility that should be explored more. Firstly, enabling forms of cohabitation that would value individual differences and preferences instead of treating them as vices in need of neutering. Secondly, how we are capable of being responsible for a living space that extends beyond the

territory of our home or housing co-op.

The shortcomings in allowing various ways of cohabitation and spatial responsibility are historically linked to the Soviet organisation of space; that oscillated between extreme rigidity and indifference. Life in a communal apartment was forced on people and for many it was a battleground of constant self-assertion and uncertainty. The corridors, however, were a no man's land of shady characters and cat ladies and there was no point in even attempting to take responsibility for it.

What is happening now is a direct backlash to that situation, which is why the regained private property has been molded into an idol and the communal space of apartment buildings is controlled with military strictness. We still turn to bans and laws instead of agreements that could meet people's wishes according to a floor, a hallway, a co-op or region.

For example in German co-ops, at first glance, everything you can and can't think of seems to be regulated, even carpet-beating is timed. Yet daily life is mostly regulated by agreements among the residents. Rules of all kinds are written for socially impaired idiots. Everything is allowed for those who can reach an agreement with their neighbours. Here in Estonia, the rule 'my room, my rules' still seems to apply, which means that every private owner is only concerned with his or her home, ignoring how it fits into a wider context, and how it could increase its value as a living environment.

Kadri: I agree that one's living environment extends beyond one's home walls. Space surrounds us everywhere and influences how we feel, our lifestyle and our consumption habits. The inner climate of a home (I am not talking about air quality) is largely made up of the plan of the flat or house. Whether the emphasis is on a shared or private space, for instance. If the bedrooms are smaller rooms for mainly sleeping, the family will spend more time in the common living room. Therefore, large bedrooms encourage being on one's own. The same logic applies to urban space. How we move around the city, how we go to work and how we shop - on one hand, it depends on the location of the home and distances, but on the other hand, it also depends on the organisation of streets and transport. Whether or not you can use public transport or a cycle path to go from your home to your desired destination, influences how you choose to move around and that, in turn, influences where you do your daily shopping. We only get the whole picture of our living environment once we add to our home all these indoor and outdoor spaces that we use on a daily basis.

Kristi: When it comes to making decisions about living arrangements and environment, it seems that Estonians

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are practically-minded and it is also visible in shaping the whole spatial picture. Multifunctionality is praised in employees and smart devices, but for some reason, it does not extend to organising space. Streets are for moving, parks and woods are for exercise, squares are for concerts and parades. Intermediate and multifunctional options are obviously seen as suspect. The only place where you can just be is your home and even then you must make sure you have done all your chores and the neighbours are not watching.

I am a little tired of these obsolete arguments that 'Estonians consider private property to be sacred'. To justify the inviolability of private property, several agonising moments in our history are brought up (Christianisation, serfdom under manors, collectivisation, etc.) when private property was violently taken from us, and even worse, we were forced to share it with strangers. And it is indeed traumatising, because people, not unlike other fauna, are highly sensitive about their territory. We mark our land, we get upset when it's trespassed without our knowledge. At the same time, owning one's territory is always accompanied by the responsibility of maintaining it. That responsibility or the obligations of the manager of each territory are much vaguer than the rights that come with owning a territory. We should spend less time on building fences and court actions and more time on enlightening discussions; on why it's good to use your own space in a way that takes others into account and what are the benefits it would bring to the society in general.

AWARENESS AND INCLUSION

Kristi: As we could all read from many election posters this autumn, issues of city planning and living environment are equated with the words 'kindergarten', 'renovation of schools', 'road repairs', 'tunnel' and 'interchange'. The question of where the pedestrians are supposed to move is smoothly ignored.

Kadri: Exactly, but these pedestrians are the very school-children, whose schools are renovated with gusto and the very mothers with their infants and prams who have been given the 18 month maternity pay to get the Estonian birth rate up. Pedestrians also include pensioners, whose well-being has been a major issue in all elections and who get a greeting from the mayor and a subsidy for their birthday dinner. However, making the daily movement in the city more comfortable for this group – not to mention disabled people – hasn't unfortunately reached our political discussions.

Raising the general awareness about how our personal well-being, living environment, urban space is connected to economic, social and cultural processes should be one of the most important issues that would give substance

to political debates. Understanding space as an extended living environment is complicated by the fact that space is not a specific object that can be understood in a specific way, instead it develops over time, it is more like a process. One thing is certain – urban space is not simply the playground of real estate developers, city rulers, architects and planners. Urban space is part of the quality of life for every resident and through their usage of space, lifestyle and consumer behaviour, everyone takes part in creating their living environment.

This lack of awareness is also influenced by the fact that there is no comprehensive approach to issues of space and the development of space in our educational system. Various aspects of space are discussed in many subjects: geography, history, social education, foreign language classes, computer classes, where different dimensions of space such as nature, man-made systems, cultural space, virtual space, etc. are discussed, but it does not mean that people are well informed because the knowledge about space is split between subjects and discourses.

Kristi: The school buildings themselves are a good example of current spatial policies. In most cases, the renovation of schools entails functional EU-standard repairs, pastel-coloured walls, a stadium inside a chain-link fence and a small lawn around the school building. How does the interior design and the exterior of the school convey the particular identity and local history of that school? I doubt that pastels alone will do the trick. Are students able to decide what kind of furniture, break rooms and toys they would like and where? If you allow the children to participate in the school's makeover, they would also develop a certain sense of ownership for the school building and its surroundings. By allowing the students to take part in shaping their living environment, they are made to feel like they also have a responsibility and the opportunity to change things in their homeplace. The more we feel that we and our efforts make a difference, the more willing we are to stay in that place.

QUALITY SPACE

Kristi: Now what, the practically-minded Estonian asks; it is nice that space is so important but what plans are there for improving the situation? We would be lying if we told you that we have the answer and know what such a nice and quality space should look like. Before us, many urban planners, architects and other specialists have searched for the formula of the ideal space and city, but none of them have found that one and definitive solution. So what is that basis on which to make space-related decisions that would sufficiently support spatial processes without bringing on changes that we would not be happy about in 30 years time?

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Kadri: I think that in order to answer that last question, we need to revise many of our current values and moduli. Several important issues (e.g. energy, transport, digital technologies) deserve to be explored in depth and with a wider discussion. However, first, to even make any adequate decisions at all, we need to let go of current attitudes and make a fresh start and reconsider the role of public and semi-public space in our society (including the issue of relations between public and private space) and the responsibilities that come with it.

Kristi: Indeed, there hasn't been a wider substantial discussion on public and semi-public space and sharing the responsibility that comes with it. Is public space the sole concern of its custodian (i.e. the state or the local government) and private space the sole concern of its owner? Then whose concern are the semi-public places like courtyards, passages, streets, squares where the spheres of responsibility of various owners intersect? Semi-public space and its creation with the temporary reprogramming of private or public space is one of the current trends that have taken fairly different forms in architectural and/or programme solutions.

One of the drivers of this trend are definitely neighbourhood festivals that try to shift the boundaries of public space in all kinds of ways, and to temporarily include privately owned space in public space. This way, at least temporarily, semi-public space is created (street concerts, courtyard cafés, apartment shops, etc.), where it is still controlled by the private owner but it welcomes and lets in everyone. After the festival, the existing situation is seemingly restored, but over time, people get more used to actively using courtyards, squares and streets as something more than mere transport corridors. The Restaurant Day and other home restaurant initiatives are also involved with undoing the stitches of the private sphere, letting strangers not only into one's courtyard but even one's home. In some city districts (e.g. Kallio in Helsinki) home dinners are a common feature of the everyday living arrangement, keeping the feeling of spring and summer festivals alive throughout the year. In terms of format, it is the neighbourhood version of the show Dinner for Five, where you create the food, the subjects and the entertainment. Registration is open to all according to availability, there is also a small fee to cover the host's expenses for the meal and drinks. So it has happened that dinners were sold out like hot cakes but it's not about the food, it's the home milieu and the chance to make new friends in your neighbourhood.

Kadri: Using space, both public as well as private, more diversely could be the way to create a relationship between yourself and the surrounding environment. This, in turn, will create interest in what is going on in that surrounding space and perhaps increase a sense of responsibility and empathy.

Kristi: Responsibility and empathy cannot be created with tough rules and threats of a beating only. All these preconceived notions related to space that we have discussed are largely linked to growing into a full-fledged citizen. The problems that arise from lack of responsibility in citizens (such as tax fraud) form an undercurrent that influences the functioning of the entire state. In our daily living space, they simply manifest themselves more distinctly, for instance in the shape of ugly and legally-aboveboard-architecture, fencing and vandalism. Space is and must remain the common area of responsibility and the binding tissue for the citizen and the state. For both the state as well as the citizen it means rethinking the black and white distribution of responsibility. Thinking in black-and-white terms means two polar opposites that operate independently from each other – the private owner with his or her private property and the state or the local government with the territory under its control. So far, both sides have acted on their own and tried to keep their noses out of each other's business. However, in the future, it is necessary to see more colours than just black (the state's responsibility) and white (my responsibility) and both sides need to move towards multicoloured, more flexible and innovative (spatial) solutions.

Exactly this kind of thinking will be used when putting together the spatial solutions in Good Governance. Our working processes and more specific solutions for the future can be seen in future writings that deal with spatial trends and future scenarios.

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