



Photo: Kristi Grišakov

CO-OP-NGO STUFF

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I live in the Uus Maailm area, at Kristiina Street 27-31. Judging by my house number, I can guess that there are at least twenty housing co-operatives and nonprofit organisations on my street. As of now, the housing co-operative takes care of garbage collection, cleaning, pays loans and sleepily racks its brains over what to replace next in the plumbing-wiring-roof beams area.

A housing co-operative is just a form of nonprofit organisation. The New World Association (Uue Maailma Selts, UMS) is an NGO, the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival is an NGO, I'm sure that even sports enthusiasts have a well-known NGO of their own. If one is to generalise, it can be said that sports enthusiasts love sports, UMS loves the city/neighbours, and PÕFF loves film. What does a housing co-operative love? In the Republic of Estonia, a housing co-operative is a compulsory people's association based on the principle of apartment ownership in the same building. In the course of your life, you can proudly display UMS or PÕFF (abbreviation in Estonian; Dark Nights Film Festival) on your CV, but not the housing co-operative. Why not?

Why think about a housing co-operative as a necessary evil for patching up leaking pipes or fighting over courtyard space with the neighbours? Let's decide instead that the housing co-operative Kristiina 27 exists for representing the interests of residents, improving living conditions and preserving and increasing the value of the building. Let's decide that our Kristiina 27 is an association for living in one building in the best possible way.

CO-OP-NGO ENTIRE HOUSE

Let's keep thinking. Kristiina 27 buys vacant apartments and rents them out or sells them on. This way, we could choose our own neighbours or control the joint expenses of the housing co-operative. One day it may transpire that an apartment in the co-op Kristiina 27 does not need another tenant, instead, a joint home office-cum-library or a laundry room-cum-sauna thingy is required. Or it happens, like it often does in life, that we, the residents of the co-op Kristiina 27, grow old and need a masseur or a therapist to visit us, and make sure that we can exercise and that cleaning and laundry is taken care of. And before that, we have children, several for one

hallway, and some babooshka could look after them some evening when we're all out. And teach them Russian. All this can be arranged by some PLC Grandchild or Grandmother and in that free space that we can use according to our needs.

CO-OP-NGOS ACROSS THE COURTYARD

Next, the co-op Kristiina 27 will talk to the housing co-operative of the house next door, of the house across the courtyard, of the house with the really ugly green chain-link fence, to figure out what else should be happening in the common courtyard. The NGO Uus Maailm is already growing herbs and vegetables and flowers there, the Mutika house has a little enclosure with a table and a bench, where you can have a nice cup of coffee in the summer. So all of the housing co-operatives of the same courtyard come together to match, apply, dig, write, hustle so that the park would have even more functions that would matter to the people living in surrounding houses and make life cooler. I for one want monkey bars for doing pull-ups.

And once we've agreed that we'll make sure that everyone willing to join the thinking process is happy in our park, no one will have to put their own skin on the line to fight some dark forces (in court)¹, to stop five-to-eight-storey, legally-it's-all-aboveboard architecture² from springing up under our bedroom windows. However, if the gang of housing co-operatives decided to give up their flowerbeds, cafés, monkeybars and all things nice in the future, because they realise that despite the falling value of real estate the construction could actually alleviate Tallinn's great shortage of housing, we could build these eight storeys in our park with the participation of these 7-9 housing co-operatives and make it as special and first-rate as possible.

CO-OP-NGO ACROSS THE STREET

Every NGO Across the Courtyard probably also has a Co-op-NGO Across the Street. Kristiina Street is a chunk of asphalt with crumbling kerbs, some measly lawns and the Volga Shop famous among car-lovers. Let's put our heads together with the co-op-NGOs from across the street and think about the lawn, kerbs and the future and fame of the Volga Shop.

This way, it is possible to control parking, speed limits, rights of way, to make our own rules. Every car lane of the street doesn't have to be so wide that the lampposts have to spring up in the middle of the pavement. We can match those guys on Soo Street. We could even move beyond popular road construction and talk to the neighbours from across the street about what they plan to do with their courtyard, what do they want to grow and develop there. Does every house really have to be surrounded by the green chain-link fence, the cheapest option? We have the annual festival, the monthly Mutika's Kitchen Radio Show, but we have no everyday calm traffic area. Now, if 20 co-ops got together, our voice would be louder - let's say that a written appeal by 20 co-op-NGOs could easily have the force that is necessary for solving the issue of a calm traffic area on a city level.

NEIGHBOURHOOD CO-OP-NGO

All this co-op thingy could be brought under one neighbourhood association. That would be the NGO of the neighbourhood. Once the co-op people have agreed with other co-ops from across the street and from across the courtyard, they go to the neighbourhood NGO.

Co-ops could easily be as helpful as amplifiers in shaping people's living environment, if only they could shake off their rotten image.

PS Toompea consists solely of NGOs too.

1. *The judgement of the Tallinn administrative court from 18 March 2008 in the case 3-06-1136, Urmas Grišakov vs the Ministry of the Environment and the Estonian Land Board.*

2. *A building with the cheapest project and builder that eventually brings down the value of our real estate.*