

FIELD NOTES



Väike-Õismäe Urban Walk at TAB. Photo: Keiti KJavin

RECYCLING VIRU KESKUS

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In September 2013 the second Tallinn Architecture Biennale (TAB) was organised, this time under the catchy headline 'Recycling Socialism'. The program was composed of multiple events, such as a symposium (half of the presentations with an arguable interest) and an architectural vision competition reflecting upon the Väike-Õismäe neighbourhood. Additionally several exhibitions (e.g. in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Linnahall), workshops (e.g. Failed Architecture in Rapla), excursions (organised by the Estonian Urban Lab), and informal gatherings (e.g. TAB lounge, Gala...) took place.

Having a background in journalism, political economy and anthropology, it won't be me who judges the technical architectural aspects of the program. I guess I was not invited to do that either. Quite probably the editors of this review want to get an outsider's opinion; someone who deploys a different approach and raises alternative questions. In that sense, I'm a doppel outsider, a stranger in the field of urban planning and architecture and a foreigner in Estonia.

A colleague of mine told me that the qualitative loop that has occurred from the first to the second edition of Tallinn Architecture Biennale is impressive. It is worth a mention that most of this great work was done by a group of architects from an office called b210. A second colleague told me that the curators managed to create a tiger structure almost from nothing, from scratch. However, the problem he saw is that behind the fancy and well designed assemblage there was just a cat, well domesticated, without claws and not so critical in its meow.

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Probably both are right. In my view TAB 2013 has influenced the public discourse on urban matters within the Estonian capital. Nonetheless, this was not the point of disagreement between my two colleagues, but rather if the depth and critical content of the discussions were sufficient (thus seeing the program as a lost chance to query the ground). For instance, in the opening of the symposium the head of the Estonian Centre of Architecture closed his speech by saying 'in spite of seeing posters of political parties out on the streets, we are not here to talk about politics'. This man, who seemed to have emerged from Alice in Wonderland or from a David Lynch film (always in white and forgetting the names of the curators), provoked indeed a good lesson in politics. Particularly when the next speaker, Andres Kurg, replied with his characteristic calm that 'actually it's all about politics'.

The supposed apoliticalisation of social matters is in itself a very political action. Still in any attempt to examine urban concerns we inevitably face pressures from power relations and tensions between economic rights and the collective benefit. In this sense, the way TAB's main topic 'Recycling Socialism' was presented remained quite symptomatic of the way local debates are translated into neo-liberal terms. For instance, the analysis of Väike-Õismäe was presented as an attempt at finding value in something that has been wasted; in short, a disposable in need to be recycled and 'developed' thus unworthy of restoration or protection. Why was there no chance to problematise notions of value, such as, well for whom is the benefit? The proposal to examine this prototype of a Communist neighbourhood ignored what happened in post-socialism (privatisation, de-regulation, political disengagement, neo-liberal shock-therapies...) as well as the positive and negative aspirations of the Socialist ideas. Fortunately, both issues were brought into the debate, particularly by Pier Vittorio Aureli's reflections upon the collective dimension of living and Andres Kurg's proposition to take socialism seriously, beyond stereotypes (referencing to Alexei Yurchak).

Nonetheless, it seemed to me that there was a latent attempt to avoid any political insights throughout the program. We might even problematise the neutrality of the chosen terms for the title, 'Recycling' and 'Socialism', which imply already a judgement of value and political connotations. The chosen areas to be improved have a meaningful charge too. I wonder why, instead of studying what to do with Väike-Õismäe, we don't examine the recycling processes of the Sakala Keskus (aka Solaris), Postimaja (aka H&M), the Estonian Art Academy or even the Viru keskus...

Probably, now has come the time to talk about the necessity to un-develop post-socialism in Estonia and reflect upon the things that went wrong in the last twenty years. Botched opportunities such as the domestication of civil society, the touristification of the old town in Tallinn, the increasing social inequality, the miscommunication between different communities, the shrinking population of the country or the chemical trains from Paldiski still crossing the centre of the capital.

To end with a positive note, I'd remark on the variety of people gathered and the level of engagement, a good outcome to be credited to the curators. The crowd had different professional backgrounds and counted individuals from several generations. Nonetheless, it looks a bit suspicious when there are many more foreigners participating than residents of the studied areas. That probably says a lot about the way officials legitimise their political decisions; and about how the post-socialist 'transition' has been done.