



Entrance to the Jaama turg.
Common Stand at Jaama turg.
December 2012.
Photos by Francisco Martínez.

EXCAVATIONS TOWARDS THE FUTURE WITHIN THE MARKET OF BALTI JAAM IN TALLINN

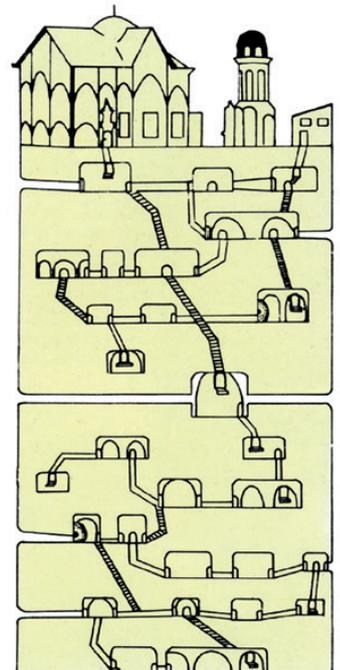
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Like the underground city of Derinkuyu in Turkey, post-socialist bazaars are constituted of wormholes that dig into social amalgamation. In these sites of exchange, past, present and future are intensively played out through objects and interactions. Overall, markets are privileged sites for ethnographic excavations. Participant observation in post-socialist bazaars is an ephemeral commemoration, a collaborative process and a balancing act of transience, revealing the complexity of our social exchanges.

In this short piece, we are presenting the ongoing work of the course on urban ethnography taught in the MA programme of urban studies in the Estonian Academy of Arts. During the course, we explore a deep time-scale, combining the study of vernacular activities with long-term processes and spatial articulations. During the first sessions, we developed the threads the students follow during their own research projects. They are dealing with a broad range of questions regarding the realm and flows of people and items as well as the built environment and aspects of legal grey areas.

The range of items sold at post-socialist bazaars are very varied: from jewellery to food, art, music, spare technology, expired goods, winter clothes, pieces of vehicles, souvenirs, second hand clothes, handicrafts, tobacco, lingerie and a great amount of junk. Conceptions of authenticity, tradition, uniqueness and origin are contested there everyday; hence the relevance to socially excavate into post-socialist bazaars. In spite of the appearances, globalisation and capitalism are intensively negotiated and translated in these sites. For instance, we can see this latent intercourse in the items displayed at the stands, many of them coming from Poland, Russia and China. However, the different routes followed by these objects are not that evident, as well as the reasons why people keep coming to these bazaars. By taking this site of consumption as a wormhole,

1. Francisco and Jürgen might be presented as dilettantes and practitioners, who, at times, are invited to teach something like 'Post-socialist Urban Ethnography'. We thank the editors for their comments on the essay and encouragement.



The underground city of Derinkuyu.
Image from www.american-buddha.com.

2. Hüwelmeier, G. (2013). *Post-socialist Bazaars: Diversity, Solidarity, and Conflict in the Marketplace*. *Laboratorium. Russian Review of Social Science* 5, 1: 52-72.

3. Sik, E., Wallace, C. (1999). *The Development of Open-Air Markets in East-Central Europe*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 23, pp. 715-737.

4. Aidis, R. (2003). *Officially Despised Yet Tolerated: Open-air Markets and Entrepreneurship in Post-socialist Countries*. *Post-Communist Economies*, Vol. 15, No. 3. 461-473.

5. In March 2014 we made a dozen of informal interviews on this regards with people around the market, getting mostly positive and neutral responses. Critical views were often related to the current shape and material decadence of the market, rather than against the activity or the site itself. Negative associations were, to a great extent, based on comments from relatives or news published in press alerting of the 'dirtiness' of the market and 'dangerous' people who frequented the site. In another exercise, vendors and clients were interviewed, obtaining a particularly positive response and identification with the market.

6. Pachnikov O., Voronkova L. (2009). *New Old Identities and Nostalgias for Socialism at St. Petersburg and Berlin Flea Markets*. In Ingo W., Schroder & A. Vonderau (Eds.) *Changing Economies and Changing Identities in Postsocialist Eastern Europe. Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia. Series*. Lit Verlag, pp. 191-216. Also: Pachnikov, O. & Berman, D. 'Spaces of Conflict and Camaraderie. The contradictory logics of a postsocialist flea market'. In Cross, J. And Morales, A. *Street Entrepreneurs: People, Place, & Politics in Local and Global Perspective*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 201-223.

7. Kaneff, D. (2002). *The Shame and Pride of Market Activity: Morality, Identity and Trading in Post-socialist Bulgaria*. In R. Mandel and C. Humphrey. *Markets and Moralities*. New York: Berg. P. 33-53.

8. Kukk, K. (2014). *Tallinna Balti jaama turu piirkonna väljanägemine paraneb*. ERR, 11. March 2014.

we have access to entanglements of production, logistics and finances that are socially embedded unequivocally.

Since their very origin, these bazaars have been providing services and goods that are not channelled by the state or the prevailing economic system. In this sense, open-air markets are not an opposing force to modernity or capitalism, or a residue of history, but a social infrastructure that fills the gaps and failures of late-modernity. Indeed, post-socialist bazaars raise questions about social integration and language skills. Many of the workers in the market speak only Russian; some others suffer current judgements of 'human obsolescence' or simply have not managed to adapt to the radical and shock transformations of the last decades.

From the survival functioning that characterised these sites of exchange in the late eighties and early nineties (a period characterised by shortage and turmoil), they evolved into a space of inclusive co-habitation, whereby minor communities and marginal individuals find not only a refuge but also a sense of belonging and a door to access the city centre. Situated in communication hubs, these sites of exchange function as a space of inclusion for precariously positioned groups: from elderly residents to stroll to racial minorities to wander without fear.² Post-socialist bazaars still provide a social glue and cultural air, enhancing, through public interactions, feelings of empathy and difference.

To study all this in 'the most IT-innovative country' might sound like a paradox, or at least, out of place, according to what official discourses proclaim about the Estonian society. Historically, post-socialist open-air markets have been under attack by formal institutions, urban planners and financial speculators. For instance, Silk and Wallace remark that these bazaars were already suspiciously regarded by communist regimes, as a site of 'parasites' that do not produce anything 'real'.³ Likewise, Ruta Aidis denounces the amount of prejudices associated with these markets, 'seen as especially dangerous and immoral places'.⁴ This is the case also with the Balti Jaama Turg (known as 'the Russian market' among the expat population). As discovered in one of the activities of our course, the negative associations of the 'Russian' market are often exaggerated and sourced by people who do not go there.⁵

Pachnikov et al. note how dialectics of private and public are represented through objects and people in post-socialist bazaars. These spaces are ambivalent and have a taste of sorrow and regret; on the one hand, because the presence of many people there is forced. Yet on the other hand, these sites allow precariously positioned individuals to find camaraderie and reciprocity.⁶ Kaneff puts forward 'uncertainty' as a common feature among all these markets; uncertainty because of several reasons: being directly affected by the experienced political disruptions, suturing abjections of high-capitalism; being detached from local institutions; and due to the attitude of the vendors (who rely just on themselves, or on the near community of relatives).⁷

In the mid of our course, we have encountered an unexpected bitter-sweet situation. Balti Jaama Turg has been bought by Astri real estate owners of the Lõunakeskus, one of the biggest shopping malls in Estonia. The fate of the market has advanced into a higher degree of uncertainty. Rumours about the construction of a shopping mall on the site are being spread. So far, Kairi Kivi, a board member of the real state company, has announced a plan to have commerce there as a primary industry and to preserve 30% of the actual market. Their first measures will be to improve the overall look of the bazaar and its surroundings. Other investors nearby have also planned similar strategies: for instance, transforming the water tower building into a gallery, with offices and a café.⁸

The abuse of 'culture' for speculative profits is not new at all.⁹ However, we find a couple of interesting paradoxes in the case of Balti Jaama Turg. Nowadays, Tallinn has two square metres of shopping floor space per inhabitant, with this figure appearing among the top four in Europe, yet with new malls soon to be opened (i.e. in Lasnamäe) and extended (i.e. Ülemiste) the figure will be increased.¹⁰ Likewise, some other open air markets are emerging simultaneously in Tallinn, counting with institutional support yet selling vintage pieces, handicrafts and organic food, and more related to festivals (Nõmme turg, Uus Maailm 'pop up' activities, Raekoja plats...).

Post-socialist bazaars display many of the hallmarks of gentrification, because of both: attracting certain people to certain quarters, while 'inviting' some others to move away. As pointed out by Maruyama and Trung, traditional open-air markets are evolving into two different types: one concerned with freshness and safety, which is more formal and has the middle and high class as a target. The other, rather ignored by authorities, is left alone in its functioning, tending to materially and economically depauperate. Consequently, just low-income shoppers show up there and the vendors suffer an increasing pressure from financial forces against their activity (or more concretely, against their occupation of this central space). Maruyama and Trung conclude, however, that these two marketplaces serve different segments of consumers, thus they might be complementary and not necessarily produce gentrification.¹¹

Accordingly, we suggested our students to also include the designer market at Telliskivi in their research.¹² With its orientation being different to the one of Balti Jaama Turg, it offers a promising territory to find comparisons and contextualise the developments in a broader spatial and time scale. Following the historian Karl Schlögel's proposal of a division between 'hot locations' in the making and 'cold locations' that are consolidated,¹³ Telliskivi today rather evokes the latter, while the bazaar around the station still bears the characteristics of an ant nest, a hot location in transformation, entropic in its post-socialist condition.

Many of the concerns announced in the book 'A User's Guide to Tallinn' (2002) about the increasing segregation in Tallinn and the detachment of the centre from the rest of the city have been already accomplished.¹⁴ Modestly, we propose to declare the Balti Jaama Turg as 'living' heritage of both post-socialism and late-modernity. In our understanding, this market is heritage-in-the-making, encompassing a material and immaterial value and speaking to future generations. This site of cohabitation and exchange can be considered as a sort of seismograph that mirrors and drives societal changes from the bottom.

The Balti Jaama turg is not a ruin or a monument, but a space of interaction and a gate to the city centre. Therefore we believe that the market is needed and should be legally and economically supported from the city hall when facing speculative takeovers. The survival of this street market depends upon a public initiative to improve its current shape and standards. Its authenticity relies only in its active and accessible functioning. Hence, it should be preserved, yet not as a motif to decorate a shopping mall, but in its own inclusive and informal functioning – as an open process of becoming heritage (in its own letting be).¹⁵

It is not true that if a public space is closed down, another one will appear. Sites of interactions and social inclusion should be protected, as oases are from the advance of the desert.

Product presentation at the market.
Photo by Jürgen Rendl.



9. See Krivý, Maros (2013). *Don't plan! The notion of 'culture' and transformation of obsolete industrial space*. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies*. Also Colomb, C (2012). *Pushing the Urban Frontier: Temporary Uses of Space, City Marketing, and the Creative City Discourse in 2000s Berlin*. *Journal of Urban Affairs*. 34, 2: 131-152.

10. Tallinn has been called 'The Promised Land of Shopping Malls'. See *Baltic Business News*. 25.10.2013.

11. Maruyama, M. and Trung, L. V. (2010) *The nature of informal food bazaars: Empirical results for Urban Hanoi, Vietnam*. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 17, 1-9.

12. The outcome will be presented at the end of workshop-studio, hopefully in the form of a brochure. Probably, an exhibition about the 'street market aesthetics' will be also organised.

13. Schlögel, K. (2003). *Reading time through space. On the History of Civilisation and Geo-Politics*. München: Hanser. P. 292.

14. Kurg, A. and Laanemets, M. (2002). *A user's guide to Tallinn*.

15. Pétursdóttir, P. (2013). *Concrete matters: Ruins of modernity and the things called heritage*. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 13, (1), pp. 31-53.