

UNFINISHED SOCIALISM: FIVE IMAGES FROM TALLINN

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Tallinn is easy to read – different eras and ideologies are drawn out in space with extraordinary clarity. This also applies when looking at the spatial heritage of socialism. Modernist ideals characteristic to Soviet planning that envisioned a city functioning like clockwork, where everyday life takes place in well organised micro districts and fast public transport moves masses between factories and home, have stretched the borders of Tallinn both towards the East and West. Building Mustamäe, Lasnamäe and Õismäe within a few decades is an example of the large scale visions characteristic of Soviet planning, the same could be said about the fairly radical large scale transport planning (look at Tauri Tuvikene's text).

The specifics of Soviet planning derive from land ownership. All the land belonged to the state, and architects, the ones who of course were approved by the regime, had quite a bit of liberty in designing large-scale projects with multiple parts. Soviet Tallinn was planned through general plans, first of which was created in 1953 and second already in 1961–1962.¹ Those general plans envisioned the urban development for the next 30-35 years and set the main parameters for building in the city. More detailed plans resulted from various planning projects. Already the first general plan saw the importance of Tallinn as a seaside location and looked for solutions for connecting the city centre with the coast, planned a new city centre and mobility solutions. Transport corridors in the city were planned to be radial. The second general plan, the so called 'The plan of Great-Tallinn' focused more on large scale housing estates – during the planning period the number of inhabitants in Tallinn grew considerably (from 283 071 in 1959 to 478 974 in 1989). The Soviet period was a time when Tallinn went through the quickest changes and grew the fastest.

When whatever kind of regime changes for another, a certain permanently temporary state remains. Projects that have not been finished will be replaced with new visions, but ideas that were never realised continue to live on in discussions that tend to resurface again and again and are expressed in the small-scale spatial absurd – a staircase, that leads nowhere, or design of contemporary architecture that follows the trajectories of former visions. The 1990s were characterised by opposition to Soviet spatial developments, and people wished to replace planning solutions that derived from socialist ideals with a more Western space. This type of opposition was supported by the very quick growth in private property. Exactly these sort of interruptions or changes of direction in spatial development create contrasts and shifts, tighten the atmosphere of the unfinished, and further emphasise the spatial complexities of Tallinn.

The photo reportage is looking for signs left behind by never fully realised Soviet planning projects and asks how unfinished transportation networks, a district centre, central square, a street and radial promenades influence contemporary spatial experience and planning. We have chosen five examples that are all significant in their own right.



RÄVALA AVENUE – A LINK BETWEEN TWO MAIN ROADS.

Rävala avenue was designated to become a significant central axis already in the first general plan. Together with Teatri square, that was to be designed in front of Estonia Opera House, it would have become an important trajectory for movement in the city centre. In the second general plan the avenue was drawn longer towards West, so that it would connect two radial main roads – Pärnu and Tartu road.² This connection was planned to be finished

with the building of a new opera house on Tõnismäe. An architectural competition was even organised, but a satisfactory plan was never established and the idea, which would have also included demolishing a significant number of wooden houses also did not find support among the local inhabitants.

It seems, however, that the plan is still alive. The extension of Rävala avenue continues to be in the general plan of Tallinn today as a necessary connection on the East

and West axes. On 2014 a building by Pius architects will be finished in the end of Rävala avenue that in its form seems to consider the opportunity of the cut through being built one day (Photo). The project description states: 'So that the person moving in the proximity of the building would sense the continuation of urban space on the perspective Rävala avenue, the main block of the building has been lifted on the level of the 5th floor.'



VIRU SQUARE - NEW HEART OF THE CITY.

In 1945 Viru square was designated to be the new main square of Tallinn. The idea continued throughout the rule of Stalin. A competition for the design of the square, however, was only organised in 1962. When in the beginning of the Soviet period the area was envisioned as a central square hosting parades and meetings, then by that time the vision had somewhat changed. Actually, it was even suggested that the area could be partially or fully built up.³ However in the project for planning and housing in Tallinn this solution was set aside. The project saw the area not as built up, but rather as

a new centre of public life and business. Parades and meetings took place on the Freedom square and at the Maarjamäe memorial.⁴

In the contemporary urban space Viru square is missing - the notion 'Viru square' continues to be used, but there is no square in the classical sense. With the building of Viru shopping centre in 2004 the area gained a new direction of development. It has become one of the main business and shopping areas in town. But the motive of a public square resurfaces from time to time as a card against building further commercial buildings and increasing car centric traffic.



MUSTAMÄE – THE FIRST BEDROOM SUBURB.

The development of industry and the exponential population growth after the second world war increased the need for housing. Planning industrial open plan suburbs was initiated. The construction of Mustamäe started in 1962 and envisioned was an open plan large-scale housing estate combined of micro districts with 4-9 storey housing. Every micro district would include the necessary public and commercial functions and green spaces. The centre of the district was planned to be in the area between Ehitajate road, Mustamäe road and Keskuse road. In 1970, architect Raine Karp made a detailed plan for the area, but it never reached the

stage of a building project. The district centre was seen to include a large cultural centre with a 1000 seat cinema, library, dance hall, restaurant with 350 places, hotel, café and diner and a shopping centre. Next to that an administrative high-rise building would have been built.⁵

This fate is characteristic of a number of large-scale housing projects, in Tallinn and elsewhere. Many public buildings and centres of micro districts have been left unfinished, foremost because of rushed construction. In conditions of the ever increasing demand for housing, apartments would be built, but never the communal functions. Because of this, the image of these districts

being foremost bedroom suburbs has deepened.

Today, the planned central area is a green space with playgrounds and sculptures. People have learned to use the park through initiatives of the local municipality. However, it seems that near where Mustamäe meets Nõmme there is no real need for a green space like that. It is difficult to pin down in space where would be the centre of contemporary Mustamäe – more social focal points are gathered around the Tallinn University of Technology and various shopping centres. Planned micro districts don't function especially because of the lack of public facilities.

time and time again, with titles such as 'The high speed tramway of Lasnamäe will be built in five years' (2004)⁶ and 'Tallinn promises that the speed tramway will be built by 2017' (2011).

The construction started in 1988 and even the rails were placed.⁶ This was a year before the singing revolution and for various reasons the project was never finished. On Laagna road today the tramway is marked by stairs that in the middle of the road seem to lead nowhere, and the idea of a tramway continues to live on in articles published

LASNAMÄE AND A STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE. Lasnamäe is the newest of the panel housing districts in Tallinn. The main roads were planned to be excavated into the ground and Laagna road was finished according to that plan. In 1978 the transportation scheme project for Tallinn was approved and this also included a tramway.



VIRU HOTEL AND LINNAHALL - OPENING TALLINN TO THE SEA. Interestingly, opening Tallinn to the sea has developed into an unsolvable problem for over half a century. Access to the sea was a central topic already of the first general plan in the early 1950s and the topic is more and more actively dealt with today.

Viru Hotel, the first high-rise in Tallinn, opened its doors in 1972. Linnahall was built for the yachting competition of the Moscow Olympics in 1980. Both of these buildings are part of a programme of recognising Tallinn as a seaside location. Linnahall is the first building that gave inhabitants an opportunity to connect the sea

with the city centre, and for that it is significant. As a connection between Viru Hotel and Linnahall, a wide pedestrian boulevard was planned that would take you straight to the sea from the Viru square. Linnahall was planned to be surrounded by a seaside park.

Today this vision can be sensed when standing on top of Linnahall and looking towards the Viru Hotel - there are wide stairs that seem to be a little bit too grandiose in relation to the streetscape they lead into. Two significant examples of modernist architecture are distinct from the surrounding built environment that originates from various periods of time.



Permanently temporary

Stalled or never finished projects are definitely not just characteristic to the Soviet period. Similar examples are plentiful even in contemporary Tallinn – to name a few, the building of the Estonian Academy of Arts or the new building for the urban government come to mind. In today's space the unclear faith of these objects is expressed in temporary uses: temporary contracts for petrol stations, car parks or some other 'flexible' solution seems to fill the gap. What makes the visions of the spatial planners of the Soviet Union distinct is their scope – unfinished projects include centres of housing estates, large roads, transport corridors, a boulevard and a planned central square.

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