

HOME IN A DISTORTING MIRROR

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There is no other subject as banal as home. Most people own homes, and if not in reality, then they at least have an ideal in mind. We refer to homes very often, for instance, when talking about upbringing, lineage, traditions and values. This subject could also be treated as one type of environment among others on the aesthetic level. The aim of the present paper is to find accord in seemingly as different models of homes as those of the Soviet times and of independent Estonia. My task is to question the common opposites: modernism–postmodernism, domesticity–homelessness, individuality–collectivity, planning–experimenting, homogeneity–heterogeneity, and stability–changeability. Such an opinion, stressing polarity and extremities, is rather widespread in literature discussing art history and cultural history, and is expressed by numerous readers and research on the subject. But still, we can find stability and similarities in such vastly different cultural landscapes as a Soviet home and a home in independent Estonia.

This article can also be treated as an entry in a lexicon, attempting to reveal two different yet still interrelated meanings in one and the same word.

Homesickness of *homo sovieticus*¹

To find a common area in these two different meanings, we first have to discuss the politics of everyday life that affected the home. Contrary to capitalist society, no private property existed in the Soviet Union, and all investments were controlled by the Communist Party. Proceeding to architecture, we could generalise that the owner of land and the orderer of buildings, meaning the state – ideologically it equalled the people – had every freedom to decide what should be demolished and where new buildings should be erected. In such a "democratic centralisation," city planners had a considerably stronger influence than they

¹ According to Novalis, even philosophy is only the homesickness of the mind.

would have had in the presence of the private sector (Häussermann 1996: 216). Being Soviet officials, they decided upon the location of cultural and shopping centres, administrative buildings and service centres. Contrasted to the fragmentary infrastructure of Western cities, caused by private property, the Soviet "ideal city" was characterised by axiality, clear order, monumentality and modularity. The visual environment of the post-war totalitarian state was dominated by Classicism-based traditionalism, peppered by local elements and graced by the motto "national in form, Socialist in content."² The "Stalinist style" was, after all, an episode, and after the "thaw" which began after the death of the dictatorial head of state, the road to modernism, harmonising with industrialisation, was taken up. The Soviet ideology related well to the aesthetic of modernism: belief in progress, rationality, and in the superiority of new forms. In the Estonia of today, the large dwellinghouses, built of large reinforced concrete elements, have the effect of special monuments, alienated from the environment. For example, look at some of these apartment blocks, built of painted reinforced concrete elements in Kopli, Pelguranna and other districts of Tallinn in the enthusiasm of standardisation in the 1950s. Today, these are the most awfully deteriorated buildings in town, if only to recall those windowless palaces of horrors on Sõle and Majaka streets. In the Mustamäe district, which was erected in the 1960s, the general constructional performance was already of much better quality. The district was designed in free planning, the houses all had modern conveniences, different shades of greyish plaster and pebble covering on the construction elements and a brown/greenish glow of the plastic coverings of the balconies add charm to the exteriors of the houses. Only the layout of the flats cannot be approved.³ Mustamäe is seconded by another district – the Õismäe circle district – where the prices of real estate are rather high now. The façades of these houses were finished in light colours; the balconies were painted orange. The location of this district might be quiet and peaceful, but like Mustamäe, its traffic system has not been well-designed. Only the network of shops and schools was worked out better. In the 1980s, Tallinn gained another cluster of new dis-

² One of the most representative treatments of Estonian interiors and exteriors of the Stalinist era has been written by Prof. Krista Kodres. See Kodres 1999.

³ The development of the modernist environment in Soviet Estonia has been analysed by Piret Lindpere (Lindpere 1999), the completion of the Mustamäe district has been more thoroughly discussed by Triin Ojari (Ojari 2000).

tricts of dwellinghouses, called Lasnamäe. Depending on their location, the status of buildings of this cluster is different. The real ghetto area around Pae Street is contrasted with newly renovated houses, such as 33 and 35 Alvari Street.

Unlike architecture historian Mart Kalm, I do not believe that the housing of the Soviet times had to operate as a tool of Russification.⁴ International *polemos* seems to be too romantic for the author of this article; rather, the aim of standardisation should have been the levelling of people – making them equal. We can well understand that people craving for a flat of their own had to put up with a standard flat with running hot water and central heating and were grateful for the opportunity of escaping from their former deteriorated homes or cellar dwellings. Borrowing from Michel Foucault: buildings of the city worked as a disciplining and regulating mechanism, as a machine that demanded contentment.

Russification has already been the subject of some earlier works. Aili Aarelaid portrayed it in 1988; she points out the import of the Russian population during the Soviet period, and adds the aspect of Russification of the local professional culture (Aarelaid 1988: 19). She describes in a rather militant tone the use of local labour in obtaining industrial production, which was exported in a colonial⁵ way (Aarelaid 1988: 24), and elaborates how serious Estonian farmers had to support the Russified city proletariat (Aarelaid 1988: 25). The statement that the other culture in Estonia is rather a Russian language-based cultural configuration, a subculture, and does not represent the cultural truth of Russia or any other nation, but is a mixture of elements drawn from these cultures, is a contradictory, but convincing feature of the article. Retrospectively we could talk about Russification on the language level, characterised by bilingualism in all kinds of office forms, street names, Russian-Estonian mixed schools, etc. On the wider mental plane we should use the term Sovietisation. The ideal product of

⁴ Prof. Mart Kalm gave a presentation, "Modern City as a Tool of Russification: Estonian Experience," at the VI DOCOMOMO International Conference on 21. Sept. 2000 in Brazil.

⁵ A number of questions arise here about the basis of trading: whether colonial elements can be found in imports of any kind and in the exports so desirable today; or, how do the branches of great corporations resemble/differ from the previous Soviet system. As a curious example, Aarelaid presents the meat export industry, which was wearing the farmers out (Aarelaid 1988: 24); in this trade area, the producers of today complain about too few export opportunities.

Sovietisation was a Soviet man, an obedient builder of communism, who was equal to all other similar "Soviets." The system took social care of war veterans and large families. The ideology of equality was another reason why the system tried to uproot people and relocate thousands of inhabitants of the Soviet Union to areas where jobs were found⁶ – or rather, new jobs were created in such a way as to encourage migration. As a result, the percentage of the Estonian national population was reduced from the 88% of the pre-war time to 64% in 1980 (Misiunas; Taagepera 1997: 328). In spite of concrete measures that were adopted, the equalisation/evening out remained inconsistent. Privileged status was awarded to the party nomenclature, military personnel and to other persons connected with official powers. The privileges included advantages in getting new flats, the opportunities of acquiring provisions in short supply (such as bananas, rare fish, etc.) and furniture, permission to buy cars, etc.

On the ideological level, the Soviet Union manifested the attempt to provide all working people with flats according to their needs, which would also have represented the "last word" in architecture, and would have satisfied the dweller's artistic taste. A Soviet home had to create conveniences and offer beauty to everybody. But an ordinary citizen did not have many opportunities of acquiring a new dwelling. The interior design was governed by the same rules, figuratively expressed by well-known Russian avant-gardist Aleksandr Rodchenko, who thought that in Soviet society things should become our friends and comrades, contrasting to capitalist, servile things. In reality, however, the freedom of a Soviet citizen to choose "comrades" for himself among the things was very limited. The few items of furniture one could buy at the shops had been in production for decades. Already developed standards changed very slowly. The saying, "better this one than nothing at all," expressed a standing truth. Playful experimentation with form remained in the realm of experimental exhibitions (e.g. *Ruum ja vorm* [Space and Form]). In such a prevailing static state, the Soviet man was craving for originality and for coziness in his home. The home had become a play (where the desirable image/ideal is presented to oneself and to all others), but the presentation remained incomplete.

⁶ For example, in relation with the large construction projects for the Moscow Olympic Games in 1980, new workers immigrated to Estonia in large numbers.

Doll's house

The Estonian Republic is proposing a model which could provisionally be called a doll's house. Theoretically, everyone has the opportunity to build a home for himself with his own hands, or to buy it, and to furnish it according to his wishes either with imported or with Estonian furniture. The client is king. The subject of the home is widely discussed in the press; on an Estonian scale, the word *home* is abundantly used in magazine titles – "Home Style" (*Kodustiil*), "Home Studio" (*Kodustuudio*), "Home & Garden" (*Kodu & Aed*), "Home Hearth" (*Kodukolle*), "Home Doctor" (*Kodutohter*), "Modern Home" (*Moodne Kodu*), "Family and Home" (*Pere ja Kodu*). After the regaining of independence, tastes seem to have changed, but the rosy Barbie-world still remains a far horizon for many. The propaganda of consumerism is lurking behind democracy and freedom. The rub of "Barbieism" is the fancy that makes people believe that the feeling of certainty depends on the possession of things and in the accessibility of services. Barbie voices the seductive consumerism of modernist/postmodernist culture. Barbie's power lies in the fact that she is simultaneously a seductress and the object of seduction, both a promise and a pleasure (Rogers 1999: 153). Such choices and the existence of ways of expressing oneself are illusory, they represent a freedom that presupposes the existence of resources (Bauman 1988: 2).

The previously trendy dwelling districts are deteriorating. The inhabitants of these districts, many of whom are now unemployed, lack the means of investment. Since post-Soviet Estonia as a whole lacks a social focus and solvent citizenry occupy the central position, the home is often a strange place for its owner. The way home has proved to be a blind alley.

Diorama I – glow

I would connect these two periods with the notion of diorama (<Gr. *dia* 'through' + *horama* 'view'). In its first meaning, diorama is a scenic two-way painting, where changes in illumination reveal one or the other side of the painting (e.g. an autumn landscape becomes a winter landscape, day becomes evening, etc.). In older Oriental art, diorama also meant a picture, painted on both sides of a transparent material (thin silk, canvas, frosted glass), which was complemented by lighting effects. The first European dioramas were probably

made by painter, photographer and the inventor of daguerreotype Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, who held an exhibition titled *Diorama* in Paris in 1822.

Diorama acts as a dual construction, a reflecting, yearning mirage. Diorama embodies and questions such situations as the relationship between a body and an image, the borders between a room and a painting, and presence and absence (Parcell 1996: 119)⁷. The customary periodisation of literature discussing cultural studies into "before" and "after" becomes vague. The home is never only a concrete bodily environment, but it is also always the shadowy ideal of Plato's cave myth. It is a source of aspiration, a shimmer in the air. It is a yearning for a better future – for acquiring a better flat, better furniture, etc. Independent of the period, whether the Soviet times or some other time, the home is just as a promised land (Papastrgiadis 1996: 96). The home is rather a symbolic, not physical, environment (Papastrgiadis 1996: 98). The home is a place where the person himself decides for things. The home is a desire, not a necessity. It is the desire for freedom, for safety (one's own nest), for rest, for an agreeable planned routine. This desire is expressed in speech. Our home talks to us in the way we choose our belongings and design the space. Talking is the expression, the voluntary or involuntary opening of ourselves to external things. Using their homes, people hint, within the limits of their financial situation, upon their yearnings, ideals, thus turning concrete things into symbols. In a sense, each object (a cupboard, bed, table, tablecloth) is a primal image and the home itself is the centre of the world. The home is the starting point from where all narratives branch off. On the other hand, the home is always a positive place – even folktales depict it as a safe place – and leaving home is related to all kinds of dangers. The home is stability; it is a good place. The home can be considered the most personal place, and maybe even the most typical and most original place for the whole nation (Papastrgiadis 1996: 99). As a negation, the home always embodies its opposite – an anti-home. It is a kind of *unheimlich*, hiding traumas, harassment and jealousy. Modern technology is also capable of making the home an uncomfortable place. Homey, handmade things are replaced by standardised apparatuses, doorknobs, ceiling panels (Merwood 1996: 139). Neutrality lacks the craftsman's personal care for the client and the nostalgic "warmth of palm."

⁷ Actually, Parcell takes the architecture of concrete dioramas to be metaphorical, he does not interpret architecture as a diorama.

Diorama II – production

In its later meaning, the diorama is a three-dimensional exhibit, where singular objects are placed in front of a photo or a painting, set against a flat or arched background, thus creating some illusion of space. There can be miniature or life-sized and realistic dioramas. Smaller background distinguishes a diorama from a panorama and a cyclorama, which is a circular picture viewed from inside. The diorama is mostly known in this sense, if we recall museums of natural history, where it is used to exhibit stuffed animals and birds, or the former Naval Museum on Narva Road, where the diorama, which has now been demolished, depicted a battle scene.

Consequently, the diorama is an artificially designed view which aims at reality; the background offers an ideal landscape, the foreground exhibits, for example, stuffed animals, artificial plants, etc. A diorama experience resembles a feeling we get looking out of the window from a dark room – the viewer sees something like a wide mystical world. Although the background is only a few meters away from the viewer, it gives the impression of infinite depth. Usually, the diorama is separated from the viewer by glass. Behind the glass there are a different atmosphere, temperature and light.

The home is also balancing on such a borderline. It is a spectacular space, being analogous to theatre, operating similarly to a metaphor and a narrative.⁸ In their homes people exhibit valuable objects, electronic appliances, and themselves with these objects. The simple landscapes on display change over the course of time, and the images, characters and scenery vary as well. As guests, we can sense and observe the homes: they attractively resemble our personal experiences, at the same time remaining disgustingly alien. The exhibits rather depend on the fashions and design trends of the period. Since the home is, foremost, an ideal place, it is always uncomfortably located in among tradition and modernism (Papastrgiadis 1996: 96). Good taste often becomes questionable at home, since the home cannot march abreast with continuous innovation. The home is unavoidably an anachronism. Very often, a kind of *horror vacui* prevails amongst the furnishings, a fear of emptiness. Pillows, runners, bedspreads, potted plants, pedestals, carpets and wall rugs are all heaped together to form soothing settings.

⁸ Based on the works of Etienne-Louis Boullée and Gabriel Germain Boffrand, this is the way Lily Chi interprets architecture (still not home) (Chi 1996: 29).

Such objects have been accused of tastelessness all throughout the 20th century, but they have been given up neither during the Soviet times nor later. We could find an unconscious search for the symbolic meaning of life behind such scenery. People attempt to record short moments that are dear to them, which make or have made dreary everyday life into a bright experience. But retrospectively we can inevitably see dirty *vanitas* – equivalent to perishing and the transience of earthly activities.

However, the hierarchy of rooms has changed much more. During the Soviet times, the central activities were working and studying (the notorious citation from Lenin "To study, to study, to study!"); therefore, the zones for these activities were more valued in a dwelling. Sleeping and resting at home were more related to laziness and the taboo of sexuality, and the respective zones were shifted to the background. In post-socialist Estonia the process is contrary – in the frenzy of liberation, people try to throw light to traditional spheres of private life. Boudoirs, pools and Jacuzzis have become public interest. The latter are given a slight erotic connotation, but in a wider sense, the displaying of one's home is prompted by an individualist outlook. The well-being of a personality is much more important than the well-being of a collective. The overlapping area here could be the striving for importance, the origin of which could date back to peasant culture in Estonia. In their farmhouses people tried to build separate clean rooms, which were furnished with the best available furniture and textiles. In Soviet Estonia sales of consumer goods rose together with rising salaries (Misiunas, Taagepera 1997: 198). In spite of the Communist powers, people did not buy more equipment for spiritual or physical development, but home appliances and other home furnishings. In a public survey in 1973, 65% of the recipients claimed to have new furniture at home (Jürisson 1983: 12), and the majority of them could not envisage a life without a radio or a TV set (Jürisson 1983: 15). In a roundabout way we can see the victory of consumerism over Communist ideology here. The same schemes are at work in modern Estonia. On the one hand – consumerism, reflecting the striving for better conditions; on the other hand, a spectacle heading into the past.

In its own quiet way the diorama-like home breaks up familiar dichotomies: Soviet–post-Soviet, modernism–postmodernism, totalitarianism–democracy. The home is a stable place, meant for simply being in it. Trends come only later.

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