

Urban Wooden Architecture – Traditions and Significance

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Today, the role of wood-built urban areas is more ambivalent than ever. On one side, there are calculating real estate sharks and, on the other, heritage protection activists and suburban romantics, willing to see their homes in particularly time-designed city space and detesting newly built real estate villages because of their coldness and lack of spirit. With the busiest real estate market and the most expensive square meters in the Republic, these contradictions are manifest most acutely in Tallinn. However, the same problems haunt Pärnu and Tartu, where real estate development is lively enough. The actual significance of wood-built urban areas for the city as a whole is far more diverse than the consumption value estimated in banknotes.

Tradition

Throughout history, wood has been a simpler and cheaper alternative to stone buildings in the urban environment. The longer lifetime and solidity of stone buildings automatically pushed wooden buildings into a lower category, even with the exteriors giving no particular reason for such an attitude. Wood as a bearer of architectural ideas obtained a distinct meaning in the second half of the 19th century, in the mode of the Swiss style, emerging from the bosom of the 'neo' styles in architecture. Later on, its role decreased, reaching its nadir in the Soviet period, when wood was used mostly for the building of utilitarian structures and summer-houses. Some wooden buildings from that period, with a place in the history of architecture, constitute an exception proving the rule. In the last decades of the tsarist period, but also at the time of the first Republic of Estonia, the Tallinn municipality supported the restriction of wood-built areas and promoted the expansion of areas with stone buildings. Whenever an area was won for stone buildings, this automatically meant renovation restrictions

for wooden buildings – all measures were adopted to replace cheap and inferior-looking wooden areas with more representational stone architecture. Yet, analysing the apartment buildings of the early 20th century, we see that material alone did not lead to better living conditions and noble architectural solutions. The living and elaboration standards of the apartment blocks at Süda 3, designed by the architect Ernst Kühnert at the turn of the century, did not differ from the five-storey stone apartment building built in the neighbouring street according to the design of Karl Burman, some ten years later; that indeed corresponded to the ideal building style of that period.

The arrival of a new era has rehabilitated wood as a building material primarily in the building of single family homes, offering intriguing challenges and fascinating productions for architects. Today, the greatest debate and most controversial opinions are triggered by the issue of the future of historic urban areas with wooden buildings. The real estate market, as a straightforward indicator of values measured in terms of money, has undergone impressive changes in the last decade. Some ten years ago wooden buildings were unpopular and unattractive bargains; their inferior position was best manifested in price charts, where wood and stone dwellings were always referred to separately (see also Välja 2004: 23–26). Today, historical wooden dwellings have been rehabilitated and such a distinction is no longer made. The upsurge in prices in the wooden residential areas of northern Tallinn has stunned many analysts. Despite the great number of people willing to live in historical wooden dwelling areas, the pressure from real estate developers to tear down wooden buildings in their full consumption value and to replace them with larger and more lucrative stone buildings is still strong. Hence the need to define the role and imagology of wooden dwelling areas in the urban environment is urgent.

The traditional approach to wood-built dwelling areas is largely based on the above-mentioned principles: wooden houses are cheap and temporary and must make way for stone buildings as soon as the financial position of the population has improved. The modern approach to the urban environment seems to be based on rational, objective and universal values. It attributes universality to the discharge of old forms and traditions and the idea of a new beginning. Functionality, considered as an objective, rational, universal and scientific base for all the activities shaping the urban environment – the processes of designing and planning – is considered to be a mediator between the living space and man.

In preferring function to all other values, the idea of modernist Enlightenment philosophy regarding universal needs has shaped the opinion that it is possible to design an urban environment and building style corresponding to the needs of all people, to synthesise beauty, truth and rationality (Kervanto Nevanlinna 1998: 230–237). According to this viewpoint, the wooden suburbs located in the immediate vicinity of Tallinn should be torn down and replaced by new 5–6-storey buildings. This position reflects many approaches, shaped over the course of time, some with rather ridiculous roots. One is the cult of reform, progress and a cloudless future characteristic of the whole modernist world-outlook (so enthusiastically cultivated by the previous (i.e. Soviet) regime), which can be born only out of the denial and destruction of the old. In this respect, parallels can also be drawn with the wannabe-German social climbing tendency of the 19th century – an attempt to deny one’s own past and true roots. For wood-built dwelling areas illustrate the growth of Estonian peasantry into European citizens.

Another extreme, opposed to the previous attitude, is a conservational tendency to museumise the urban environment, which, taken to an extreme, seems to attempt to stop time and shut out all currents of modern life from the historical urban environment. This tendency, too, involves a number of differing viewpoints. The traditional approach to architecture, focusing on the history of style, substantialises the single object, its stylistic purity and high level of accomplishment. Studying and protecting the architectural heritage has long been based on a traditional object-centred way of thinking in art history, with rarity as one of the leading determinants of value (Alois Riegl’s theory of value, according to which originality and rarity, the latter growing over time, constitute the principal cultural value of a work of art and hence also the principle of protection; see Dehio, Riegl 1988: 88–105). For a long time, this meant preferential valuation of single architectural monuments with great historic or cultural value. Above all, protection involved public buildings with symbolic value, most of them built of stone (Suikkari 2003: 87). Seen from this angle, wooden dwelling areas look quite inferior. Yet, their role in the urban environment, and people’s consciousness of the city’s identity and development patterns are no less important. Instead of the traditional approach, based on the history of style, there is a growing tendency to analyse built urban environments as entireties bearing and generating social-historical and cultural meaning. Buildings are no longer seen as mere physical structures and individual objects of art; instead, the focus

has shifted to interactive relations between buildings, users and the surrounding world (Saarikangas 1998a: 185). This has brought about a withdrawal from the previous attitude of top-to-top movement. The traditional history of architecture is focused on analysing the role of the creator and the aesthetic significance of space; hence architectural studies have accentuated aesthetic innovation and the role of the 'hero-architects' (Saarikangas 1998b: 249). Over the course of time, such a modernist approach has become just one of many, telling the main story of architecture, yet embracing only a fragment of the actual architectural space. Together with rehabilitation, in the overall framework of architectural history, more and more discussions are held concerning the value of wooden architecture outside the common context of historical heritage; these often become determining factors in deciding upon the value of this type of buildings. An important element of this value is the meaning of wooden architecture for the city and the people living there.

Meanings

Referring to the example of St. Petersburg, Yuri Lotman has explained how, over the course of time, a newly-built uni-level utopian city becomes a normal city with multiple strata and semiotic and cultural contrasts.

A city as a complex semiotic mechanism and a generator of culture can perform this function only because it is a varied kettle of structures and heterogeneous texts and codes belonging to different languages and levels. It is the fundamental polyglotism of any city that makes it the venue of a variety of semiotic clashes, totally impossible under other circumstances. Bringing together various national, social and stylistic codes and texts, the city effectuates different hybridisations, re-codings and semiotic interpretations, thus making the urban environment a powerful generator of new information. However, the source of these semiotic clashes does not lie solely in the synchronous coexistence of various semiotic formations, but also in their diachronism – architectural structures, urban customs and ceremonies, the city plan, street names and a thousand other traces of the past function as coding programmes, continually re-generating past texts. (Lotman 1999: 333.)

Within the context of this paper, wooden architecture can be approached as one important stratum in the urban environment. Making an attempt to seek a place for this stratum on the axis of development of urban culture, we find it stur-

dily established in our national self-perception – the development of Estonians into townsfolk.

Spatial and aesthetic diversity and contrasts form an important precondition for the development-accumulation of different people and world-outlooks. Destroying one stratum of the urban environment leaves the impression of getting rid of an embarrassing fact from the past that should be forgotten altogether. At the same time, the variety of people and ideologies plays a key role in shaping a city – an outward-pointing message. The presence of contrasts is a precondition for cultural development. Abundance of different living environments automatically means abundance of different people, allowing both extremes – trendy yuppies and eco-minded bohemians – to feel comfortable in the same geographical space. In this way, as a result of gentrification (Männik 2003), the traditional working-class area Kalamaja has become a preferred living place for younger creative intellectuals, while Kadriorg, the former area of the cultural elite, has now become a status symbol that represents inclusion in the financial élite. Getting rid of wooden dwelling areas means that many people will leave, and will find a new living environment better suited to their lifestyles and beliefs. They will abandon a lifeless Euro-home for a small town or a home in the countryside. The loss, however, is greater, not on the individual level, but for the city, as it becomes duller in identity and image. This will also mean the departure of taxpayers, so dearly beloved by the politicians. Preserving wood-built residential areas also helps to retain a number of creative and unconventional people, who, as a contrast to the levelling and unification tendencies of the modern society (resulting in a manipulable mass society), dare to remain who they are and ignore the trend-worshipping lifestyle of consumption.

Preserving different architectural environments (including wooden architecture) is also a way of preserving urban legends. Place-related literary and traditional materials belong to the semantic field of a city, making up an important part of the urban text, of what we think that the city has to say. The city becomes meaningful if surrounded by legends, stories, memories, ideas and thoughts. The person who knows all that sees a totally different city than the one moving around as a *tabula rasa*. City folklore coexists with places; as soon as a place disappears, its story, too, will die. Only its earthly shell remains in the archive.

The architectural environment is meaningful only for people, as it is part of their self-perception as subjects. Walter Benjamin has pointed out the phenom-

enon that a place and its surroundings constitute a subject, giving the subject its past (Benjamin 1977: 190). This opinion is also supported by Martin Heidegger, who has said that human identity is nothing fixed, but develops in relation to the surrounding environment by way of reacting to it (Heidegger 1996: 235). The relationship between a person and a place is always reciprocal – the place gives the person his past, his memories and part of his self-concept, while the place gains significance through the person. In addition to the perception of physical factors, historical environments also trigger imagination, fed by past events, people and episodes.

The more versatile previous environmental experiences a person has had, the more layers he will perceive in any new place or milieu, and the more fascinating they will appear to him. Thus, the preservation of a diverse material environment is a direct way of cultivating people with richer experiences and multi-dimensional perceptions. The person who perceives medieval stone walls, cosy wooden suburbia, city outskirts with exclusive minimalist architecture and consumption-focused commercial architecture as equally natural (meaning he has had enough contacts with all of them) is far more conscious and freer in his choices than the one whose contacts with architecture are limited by industrial environments and unified dormitory suburban areas. Revisiting known places, a person can learn about his past and thereby also about himself. According to Walter Benjamin's topographical-spatial memory model, places can be regarded as reservoirs accumulating our memory (cit. Laanemets 2000: 70). The topic of childhood places, so over-exploited in literature, suddenly makes sense. There are people, events, emotions and even parts of our personal self that suddenly, after decades of latent existence under later associations, come to life in certain locations through re-perception of physical space, sounds and smells.

Although this memory is strongly subjective, some of it will still permeate the urban environment – the breath of history reflecting off old town walls and faded wooden dwellings. Jan Kaus has written: '...city signs are not so much houses and streets as the space between, above, in and around them, and the fillers of such space. Fillers charge space with emotions, thoughts, secrets, arguments, making babies, disappointments and everything else possible.' (Kaus 1999: 63.)

What an obvious explanation for the dullness of new dwelling areas, which starts retreating only after many years, after the space has been made inhabitable by the residents, who leave their individual and private imprints on the ideal

space constructed by architects! It is only then that urban space begins to take shape, together with all kinds of urban signs and characteristics. In importance, architectural quality indicators are surpassed by social identities; intellectual and aesthetic considerations transform into vibrant space, reflecting the needs and desires of the user (Lefebvre 1984: 106). In this context, Jan Kaus makes use of the linguistic term ‘second language’, borrowed from Julia Kristeva, saying that a city, too, has this ‘second language’, which rules out the triumph of orderliness (Kaus 1999). He finds that things regarded as ugly, or at least nonaesthetic or inconspicuous, form imperative components of Tallinn. Refraining from the extremely subjective topic or value scale of beauty/ugliness, we still find solid reasons for the preservation of the vernacular wooden architecture – it constitutes an important stratum in urban space and people’s consciousness. Based on the common understanding that a city is fundamentally meant for people, whose well-being always comes first, it is appropriate to point out that old dwelling areas which were not consciously designed but have evolved in a natural way (within a certain framework, of course), form a considerably more congenial living environment (see also de Sivers 1996) than rationally designed concept-cities. True, they have lost much of their congeniality over the course of time; there are places where decay, social problems and indifference dominate. Social problems and shabby areas are supposedly targeted through the pulling down of old houses and the construction of new modern urban areas. However, this approach has not proved workable, as the new dwelling area Lasnamäe (although built under different social conditions) harbours more social problems than Kalamaja. Life has demonstrated that a qualitative change can also be achieved by the refurbishment of old houses. Analysing city reality from the aspect of man as the user, the French theorist Michel de Certeau believes that man has found ways to resist functionalist and technocratic ‘scientific urbanism’ (de Certeau 1988: 91–110). The approach is also significant in the context of today’s Tallinn.

While the city is seen as a harbour for the users of urban space and all cultural connotations related to them, architecture is no longer regarded as solely the manifestation or symbol of social procedures, but also as a central element in the functioning of society. Built forms are perceived as important actuators of a society’s inner processes. Being part of a society, the *socium* builds and shapes urban space based on its own implications. Urban space bears these signs as special codes interpreted by people in different ways and forms a basis for their ways

of urban life. Seen from this angle, the urban environment is clearly a cultural product.

Alternatively, the urban environment supports certain behaviours, affects others and possibly rejects some altogether. People give meaning to urban space. Their lives can be seen both as filling urban space with meaning and as the interpretation of it.

Historically developed, constantly changing and contradictory uses re-generate this network of meanings on a daily basis. Through meaning, urban space can also be seen as the producer of different cultures and *sociums*.

Whenever a group or *socium* strives for the unification of urban space, their reason may lie in the supposition, regarded as modernist, of the existence of universal urban planners or the imaginary integrity of the urban environment. Hermeneutic interpretation (Kervanto Nevanlinna 1998: 230–237) has defined this tendency as pressure exerted on other groups to make them accept incompatible sign systems. The above-described traditional attitude can also be seen as such an exertion of pressure. It is often said that heritage protection areas and areas of cultural and environmental value obstruct the development of the city. This is true if, by development, a modernist process of renewal is meant, where everything should be larger, wider, ampler. These are mere quantitative values. ‘Soft’ values, such as cosiness, identity, human dimension, historical atmosphere etc., are labelled by this pressure group as romantic babble that should have no place in rational city planning, which follows the modernist vision of the possibility of rational and universal solutions. The problem of destroying the view of long-time inhabitants, the quality that they have considered as part of their homes for decades, makes no difference in today’s mentality. What make a difference are investments, tourists etc., whereas a citizen – the aborigine – often seems to be redundant in his/her own home, as were the Indians. Based on the above-discussed meanings, it is obvious that multi-layered urban space (including wooden dwelling areas) has an impact on residents’ identity and their perception of the city, thereby guaranteeing a more versatile population than any monotonous urban space ever can. Which, in turn, is crucial for the identity and development of the city.

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