

Tallinn's narrative through façades



Historische gebouwen Paramaribo. (z.d.). SuriVision. <https://www.surivision.nl/historische-gebouwen/>

Introduction

Much like one can read the narrative of a book by the words on its pages, one can also read the narrative of a city by its façades. By studying facades and their urban integration, the past and the present can be read. Eventually, a future for both the façades and the city can be (re)imagined.

My intrigue for scrutinizing facades unknowingly took root during my strolls in Suriname's capital, Paramaribo as a young girl. As I wandered its streets, the European-style facades, adorned in white painted wooden panels with a red painted stone base, caught my attention—a legacy of Dutch colonial rule from 1667 to 1975. Over time, some of these historic structures evolved into a more Americanized architectural style, mirroring the impacts of independence and privatization. The cityscape became a tangible narrative, allowing me to decipher the intertwined threads of history and contemporary influences within the facades. Yet, how does this observation connect to Tallinn?

Tallinn, Estonia

Tallinn, Estonia, originated as a Hanseatic city in the Middle Ages and has the typical architectural features of that era: fortified town walls, a palace, large churches and lively squares. Tallinn endured many wars and occupations, of which the Swedes and Russians left their mark on the city. The 1988 Singing Revolution became its crescendo, breaking away from Soviet domination. Today, Tallinn demonstrates endurance, revealing its

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Tallinn, Estonia [own photos]

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past, present and future through the ‘changing expressions’ in both the urban morphology and the architecture.

‘Changing expressions’ is the result of a contextual analysis of Tallinn conducted by Iveta Nikolova, Gergana Negovanska and myself. The objective was to identify changes on various scales, understand the nature of these changes, and explore their practical implications. Among the transformations pinpointed, the facade emerged as a key focus. Time, ideologies, and trends orchestrated these changes, evoking memories of Paramaribo. Now, with a conscious awareness of the city’s narrative embedded in its facades, I realized that thinking about ‘the city’s narrative through facades’ wasn’t a mere coincidence or casual observation. It became a compelling hypothesis worthy of thorough exploration.

Hypothesis: Discovering a city’s narrative through facades

To unravel the hypothesis, it is important to first recognize that it focuses on two domains, if one may call it that. The first is narrative, a sequence of related events or experiences, in this case used as a way to develop human understanding of communities, their society and their situatedness. The second is the facade, which can be interpreted as the storytelling medium or as the protagonist of the story. To narrow the research focus, this study will center on exploring facades as a storytelling medium within the context of urban narratives, posing the central question: ‘How does the city’s narrative unfold through the use of facades as a storytelling medium?’ While acknowledging the generality of this question, designed to be adaptable across various contexts, it is crucial to address it initially. This leads to pivotal sub-questions: ‘What defines a facade?’ and ‘Why is it worthwhile to investigate?’

Once the preceding inquiries are tackled, a more context-specific question can be formulated: ‘What role do facades play within the context of Tallinn?’ This paves the way for the pivotal question: ‘How can the uncovered narrative of Tallinn be effectively incorporated into an architectural project, specifically in the form of a facade?’

Theoretical framework

Defining facade

The term ‘facade’ originates from the Vulgar Latin word ‘facia,’ which pertains to the human face, encompassing aspects such as facial appearance and expression. In its earliest usage in English, the term primarily denoted the front aspect of a building, essentially its ‘face.’ Over time, the meaning



Map of Tallinn [own work]

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of “facade” evolved to encompass a more figurative sense, describing a manner of behaving or appearing that presents a deceptive interpretation of one’s genuine feelings or situation—a metaphorical mask.

Facades stand as one of the most influential elements shaping a city’s visual allure. They serve as a canvas expressing the city’s economic vitality, cultural progress, and overall identity. As articulated by Croci (1998), the facade functions as the face of architecture, serving as a gateway to a city or country’s architectural heritage. Nezhad (2023) emphasizes that urban facades constitute a city’s inaugural impression, leaving a lasting impact on newcomers. She further highlights their role as a form of communication, continually relaying diverse messages through for example, architectural signage, windows and doors which allow for glimpses into the interior.

As outlined by Korman (2022), until the late 19th century, facades exhibited a distinct and recognizable appearance, especially in buildings influenced by European classicism. The principle facade, often linked to public spaces like streets, squares, or courtyards, adhered to a defined style. However, in the past century, significant changes in language, technology, and spatial design have dramatically altered the essence of facades. This transformation has considerably blurred their once-clear definition. Korman (2022) observed that a term once possessing a specific meaning has expanded in application, almost making the historical concept of facades obsolete. This observation gains depth when examining a recent definition from the Oxford Dictionary of Architecture:

‘Facade - Any exterior surface or face of a building, but particularly that perceived to be the principal or most architecturally ambitious one.’

By asserting that ‘any exterior surface’ can qualify as a facade, the formerly straightforward definition has become more flexible. Nonetheless, Korman (2022) still identifies key factors that help distinguish the principal facade:

1. Its situatedness in the urban realm
2. Its frontality
3. A clear signifying of entry
4. The relation to the street
5. Identifying the Classical orders: the doric, ionic and corinthian
6. Ornamentation

By acknowledging these key factors and the notion that facades function as a face for architecture, being the first impression of every newcomer, the initial sub-questions—‘What defines a facade?’ ‘Why is it worthwhile to investigate?’—are addressed.

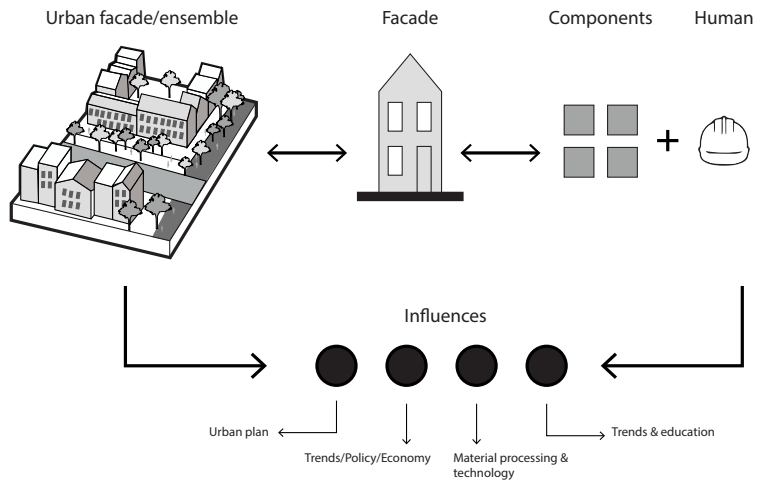
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Conceptual framework

'How does the city's narrative unfold through the use of facades as a storytelling medium?'

As outlined in the theoretical framework a facade is an integral component of the urban environment. It serves as a tangible expression of either economic considerations or a visionary concept articulated by city planners. Delving into the past, a discerning architect, while examining a facade, can deduce the era of construction based on its architectural style. Moreover, the architect can unveil specific trends, historical influences, or even the personal beliefs of the client and/or architect involved in its design. Taking a deeper dive, one can unravel the narrative embedded in the material, the processes involved, the craftsmanship, the builders, and external factors such as climate that have shaped the appearance of the façade.

Often, we overlook the richness of information a façade holds, being fast to judge whether it is aesthetically pleasing or not. However, upon deconstructing a facade, one begins to discern and appreciate the genuine work and narrative behind it, moving beyond initial subjective aesthetic impressions. These interscalar leaps—from the urban scale to the assembly and creating processes—are crucial for grasping the city's narrative through the medium of facades, as they vividly depict its unfolding chapters.



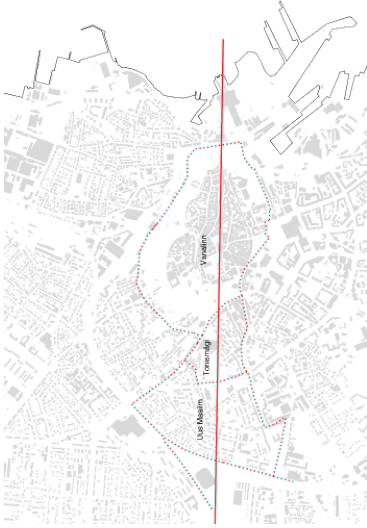
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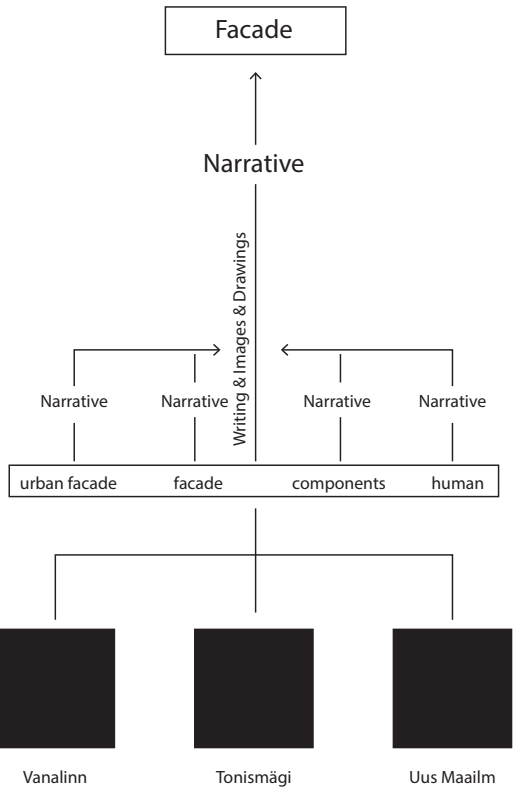
Research aim & methodology

This research aims to delve into the art of seamlessly integrating Tallinn's uncovered narrative into architectural projects, with a specific focus on facades. To achieve this, a methodical approach is adopted. Three diverse precedents, namely Vannalinn, Tonismagi, and Uus Maailm, are chosen, drawing on the group's contextual analysis. The theoretical and conceptual framework is then applied, and narratives are crafted from varying scales, providing a nuanced understanding.

A significant aspect involves visually dissecting facades, extracting features like material combinations, color palettes, openings, ornaments, mass and space dynamics, geometric principles, structural systems, and the relationships between elements. This meticulous analysis, conducted through the examination of images and drawings, contributes to a comprehensive exploration of how these visual elements tell stories. By scrutinizing these distinctive neighborhoods and employing a multifaceted analytical lens, this research aims to uncover the intricate tales embedded in the city's architecture, ultimately guiding the effective incorporation of these narratives into architectural projects.



Map of three location made by Gergana Negovanska



[own work]

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