



Architecture of Consumerism as Public Space

Research Plan

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TU Delft Faculty of Architecture - MSc 3 Graduation Studio
Methods of Analysis & Imagination

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Introduction

***“I refuse to pay alimony to those bastard developments. [Shopping malls] destroyed our cities.”
- Victor Gruen, 1978***

Gruen, V. (1978). The sad story of shopping centers. *Town and Country Planning* 46(7/8):350-52.

Over the last century, shopping has been transformed into an urban institution, the shopping mall. Once considered a fundamental component of the city, it has become a prerequisite for the concept of urbanity. Rather than the act of shopping taking place within the city, the city is now evolving within the confines of shopping spaces (Chung, et al., 2001). These sprawling complexes, often made up of a mix of retail and entertainment options, invite individuals to gather and interact, under the umbrella of consumption. The simulation of city streets and small plazas is supplanting the traditional role of the city center and its use as a public space (Djukic & Cvetković, 2016).

The modern shopping mall was envisioned by architect Victor Gruen with the Southdale Center in 1956 in the USA. In a bid to counteract the dreariness of the American suburb, Gruen wished to create “a new kind of environment” (Bader, 2016, p. 14), that combined the various roles existing in urban space. Gruen did not wish to create expressionless consumer architecture but rather a meeting place for the population. He argued that shopping was part of a human network of activity and therefore the shopping mall should serve as a multipurpose town center that enhanced commercial activities by integrating it with cultural and entertainment facilities. The Southdale Center was therefore organized around a central site that mimicked the atmosphere of a village square, complete with benches, trees, and fountains. While Gruen wished for a public space combined with commercial activity, the Southdale Center was access-controlled to only allow individuals with a certain income to enter the premises (Bader, 2016). Gruen later distanced himself from the idea of the shopping mall, calling it a “sad story” (Gruen, 1978, pp. 350-52), yet it has continued to spread and integrate itself into every urban fabric worldwide.

Though the mall has continued to thrive for decades after Gruen’s original design, a shift is currently taking place. With the rise of e-com-

merce, the typical mall design favoring retail is no longer working. Developers are trying to incorporate more varying functions leaning closer to Gruen’s original ideas but this already seems too late. Another factor that has sped up the decline was COVID-19. Many mall retailers were forced to close their doors, assembling a large amount of debt in the process. Research estimates that 25% of shopping malls in the US will close by 2025 (Johnson, 2023). While the decline of malls is not as quick in Estonia, the cracks are already visible in Tallinn. It is at this crossroads, that I wish to reconsider the structure of the mall as a public space that sets the individual above retail space.



Fig. 1 - Southdale Poster, 1956



Fig. 2 - Southdale interior 1956

Malls in Tallinn



Fig. 3 - Nautica Mall - 2002 *Medium SC*
18 500 m²



Fig. 6 - Viru Keskus - 2004 *Medium SC*
27 000 m²



Fig. 4 - Solaris - 2009 *Regional Mall*
43 000 m²



Fig. 7 - T1 Mall of Tallinn - 2018 *Regional Mall*
57 000 m²



Fig. 5 - Ülemiste Keskus - 2004 *Regional Mall*
70 000 m²

Problem Statement

Shopping malls in Tallinn

Tallinn boasts many shopping centers, including the largest mall in the country and the only mall in Europe with a Ferris wheel atop the roof. The city has shunned its communist history and embraced capitalism in full architectural force. Over the last three decades, malls like Solaris, Ülemiste, Nautica, and Viru have transformed Tallinn's retail scene, offering an array of local and international brands. However, the latest mall to be built in Tallinn, T1 Mall of Estonia, has already gone bankrupt after only 3 years. Here we can already see the beginnings of the decline of the mall. Several redevelopment concepts have been brought up, yet none have come to fruition. Currently, no shopping mall developments are planned in the country due to an over-saturation of malls that are still fighting the effects of the pandemic.

Shopping malls as public spaces

The decline, however, compared to other countries has been much slower in Estonia. This is in part due to the harsh winter climate of Estonia where malls serve as more than a retail destination. Tallinn has many outdoor public spaces but few usable ones in winter. The mall is one of the only large-scale indoor multifunctional spaces that allow for social interactions all year round. They are often popular gathering places for young individuals and families, where malls serve as hubs for consumption and entertainment.

While the shopping mall in Tallinn has gathered a reputation as a popular 'public space' that allows for various levels of interaction and entertainment, I disagree with its notion as a public space. No matter the level of interaction in a mall, it is always placed under the guise of consumption. Each aspect of the mall is specifically designed to enhance profitability and gain the continuous attention of consumers. In the words of Mike Davis, a mall can be defined as a pseudo-public space, an area that looks

like a public space but is controlled by a private interest such as a corporation that upholds control over admission and behavior (Djukic & Cvetković, 2016). Most of these factors are subtle even going to the smallest detail to influence our subconscious. Simple elements such as security cameras keep a watchful eye over any suspicious or unwanted behavior. Unlike public spaces which are only subject to local laws, shopping malls contain additional rules and regulations set forth by the owner, limiting its democratic use. Architectural elements such as the lack of windows allowing for natural light and its blatant disconnect to the outside force a time disconnect in individuals. As with casinos, the mall tries to keep the individual within its walls for as long as possible, losing its sense of time and only focusing on consuming. Something as simple as a clock was nowhere to be found in any of the malls I visited.

Deconstruction of the mall

The highly designed typology of a mall creates an alienation that lacks the anthropological depth associated with traditional public areas. However, its structural configuration does reflect core aspects of human nature: social engagement, self-presentation, and acknowledgment (Thierstein, 2016). Underneath all of the consumerist details, are values that are necessary for public space. To reach those values, the mall must be deconstructed and reintegrated into the urban space. It needs to be a definitive space in the city that emulates the identity of Tallinn with its layers of history. Rather than being categorized as a 'non-space' by Marc Augé, the mall must be gutted and the public space allowed to come to the forefront where the individual is placed above the retail space.

Research Question

To restore the balance between shopping malls and public spaces, this research will focus on the main question: ***How can the architecture of consumerism be integrated to create public spaces?***

In order to answer this question further sub-questions have been identified.

How can the historical characteristics of Tallin be integrated to create a distinct 'place' identity?

How does the design of consumerist spaces affect individual behavior?

What architectural components make up public space?

Theoretical Framework

Key Terms

Mall

1: an alley used for pall-mall

2a: a usually public area often set with shade trees and designed as a promenade or as a pedestrian walk

b: a usually paved or grassy strip between two roadways

3a: an urban shopping area featuring a variety of shops surrounding a usually open-air concourse reserved for pedestrian traffic

b: a usually large suburban building or group of buildings containing various shops with associated passageways

(Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

While the meaning of the word 'mall' has changed greatly since its conception, our understanding of it as a 'public space' has remained the same. Originating from the Italian game 'Pallmaglio' or pall-mall in English, a mall became an alley specifically used to play pall-mall. Eventually, it expanded to become a public promenade for pedestrian use sometimes lined with shops. Today, the most common understanding is an urban shopping center which is closed to the elements and focuses on private consumption. Keeping the original definitions as public areas in mind throughout the year will allow me to make sure that the public space is at the forefront of the design.

Pseudo-Public

As well as the change in definition, the ownership of space has also shifted from publicly owned to privately owned. As mentioned previously, Mike Davis coined this term as areas that are privately owned and uphold control over behavior and admission (Djukic & Cvetković, 2016). Developers combat crowds by standardizing them through architectural barriers and encircling the remaining masses by directing their movements. Using visual stimuli, ambient music, and sometimes scents, creators lure shoppers

further into the space. Often greenery is introduced to harbor a presence of nature, albeit in an artificial environment. This is subconsciously meant to naturalize consumption and the alienation associated with commodity production and consumption of goods (Djukic & Cvetković, 2016). Shopping malls seek to emulate the street and square layout of public spaces, but largely remain a privately owned domain that restricts movement and subconsciously tries to control consumer behavior.

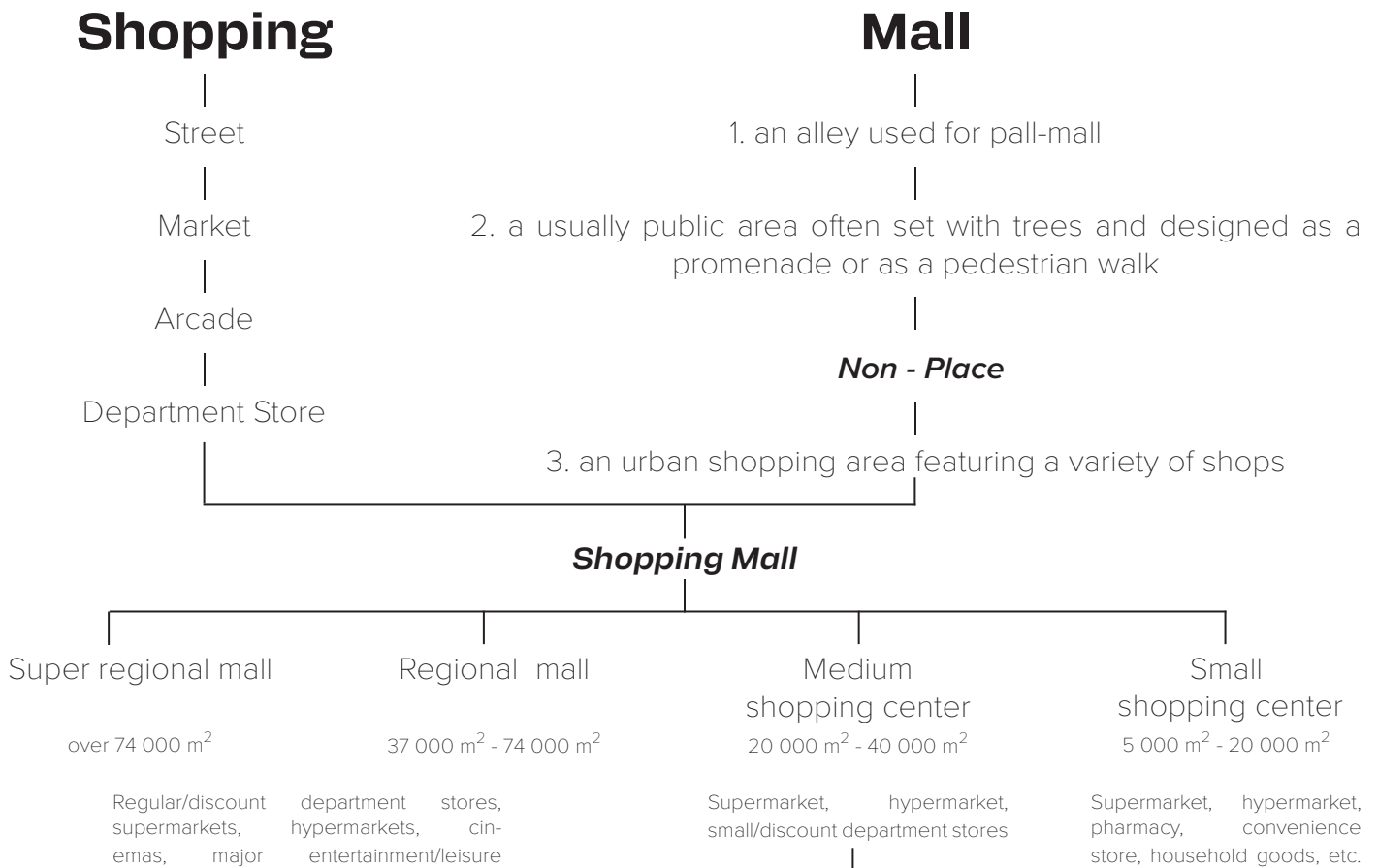
Non-Places

Marc Augé defined the term non-places as places that cannot be defined in the city as having an identity, history, and meaning (Augé, 2008). He exemplifies this as a phenomenon of super modernity that generates transit areas characterized by anonymity which facilitate rapid movements of individuals (Djukic & Cvetković, 2016). In Tallinn, any of the malls I have visited could be placed abroad and still function as a retail space since it does not have any distinct characteristics of Tallinn. In most cases, the malls purposely cut themselves off from the urban fabric, becoming an immovable block that is focused on keeping individuals inside.

Understanding the frameworks for non-places and pseudo-public places will allow me to create a design that does the opposite. I will use these frameworks to understand what not to do during the design process. It should become a public space that values the individual first and takes elements from its surroundings such as materials and design details. This will allow the building to transcend from a non-place to a place that can be defined within the city as having an identity, history, and meaning.

Theoretical Framework

Connecting the framework



Case Study - Nautica Mall

Pseudo - Public Place

An area that looks like a public space that is controlled by a private interest such as a corporation

Control over admission and behavior

Security

Architecture

- Additional rules and regulations
- CCTV

- Lack of connection to the outside - time/space disconnect
- Forced movement by placing anchor stores at different ends of the building
- Breaks through architectural elements to create new focal points to keep the attention span
- Regulation of mall widths to provide a sense of rhythm and calm
- Floor patterns used to influence pathways

Methodology

How does the design of consumerist spaces affect individual behavior?

Method: Typological analysis of a mall in Tallinn and comparison to malls in other countries.

Due to its highly designed nature, the mall first has to be understood through a typological analysis before being able to deconstruct it. A case study mall in Tallinn will be used to conduct this analysis which will also serve as a potential site. Through archival research, I will gain access to architectural plans. These will allow me to see mathematical formalities behind the influence on individuals such as path lengths and strategically placed resting areas. Other malls in various countries will be analyzed to see if any specific components are used in Estonia that influence behavior differently.

How can the historical characteristics of Tallinn be integrated to create a distinct 'place' identity?

Methods: Historical analysis of the area around the mall focusing on materiality and building forms. Literary reviews focusing on the area around the mall

Tallinn has gone through many building styles, and pinpointing one distinct feature that covers all timelines would not be possible. Instead, I will limit myself to the surrounding area of the case study mall and formulate the identity of the area. This will allow me to find elements that are local to Tallinn and allow my design to obtain a 'place' identity.

What architectural components make up public space?

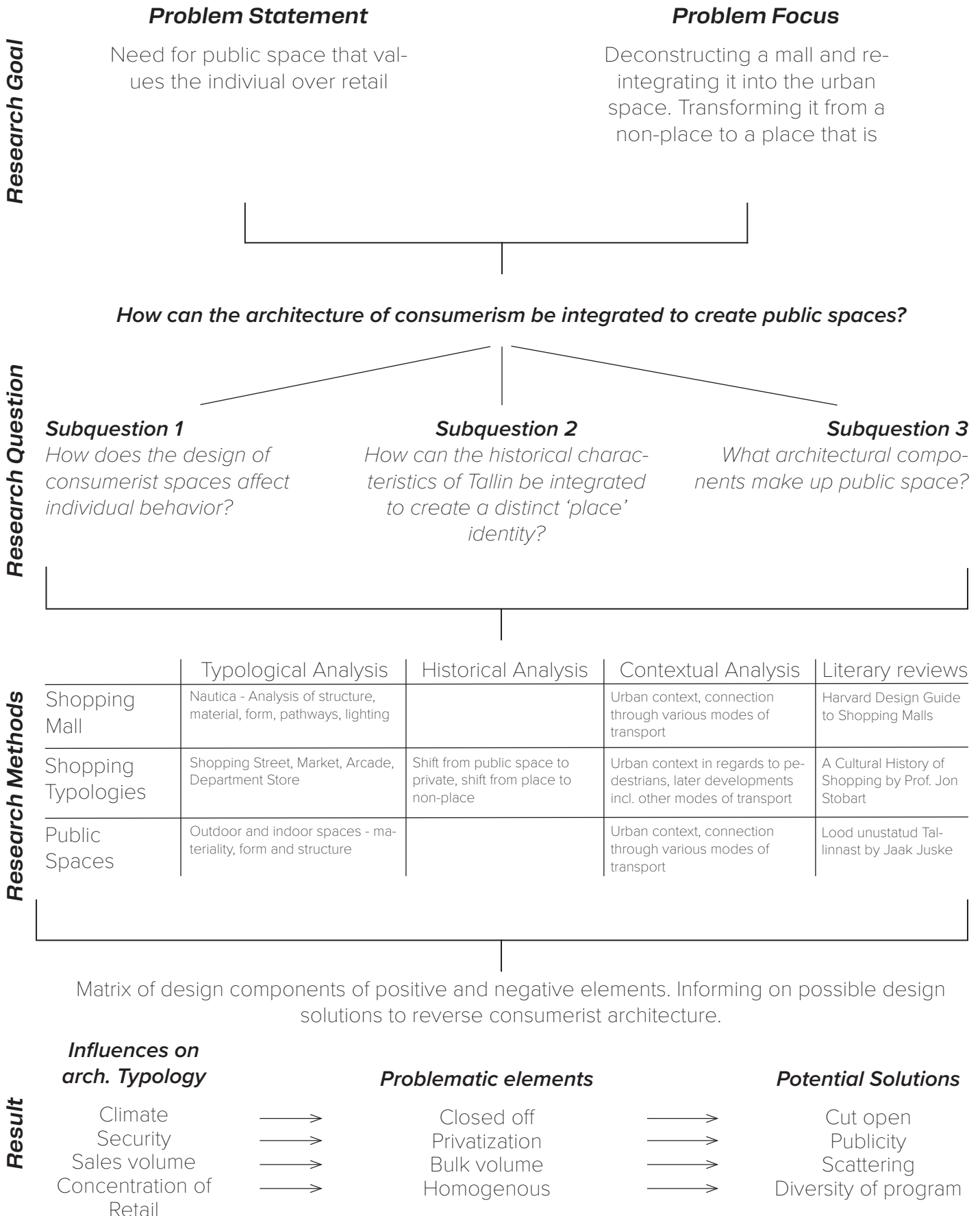
Methods: Typological analysis of public space in Tallinn and Helsinki (Underground city) and other Nordic countries

Indoor and outdoor spaces in Tallinn will be mapped to see recurring elements that are vital

to a public space. Public spaces in the Nordic countries will be chosen as further case studies to understand how countries with similar climates create public space.

At the end of my analysis a matrix will emerge featuring various design elements that are vital to consumerist architecture, Tallinn and public spaces. It will become a guidebook of elements, both positive and negative that will inform the beginning of the design phase. When deconstructing the mall, it will be crucial to reverse the elements hindering its potential as public space.

Methodology



Site & Precedent

Nautica Mall

The Nautica Mall, located between the Rotermann district and the ferry terminal, is my chosen site and a case study in Tallinn. The mall is made up of 18500m² on two floors and features retail, entertainment, and culinary spaces. The mall was built in 2002 in regards to the large flow of visitors coming from the ferry nearby. It was redesigned in 2017 and given an updated interior and a new facade featuring a modern lighting design. A large car park is situated in the front facing the Rotermann district whereas the back entrance facing the ferry terminal is mainly pedestrianized. A large traffic artery cuts the mall off from the Rotermann district in the south. However, the mall is connected to the ferry terminal through public spaces, albeit unused as they are constantly exposed to the elements.

The interior is made up of reinforced concrete walls, painted white with wooden accents to highlight different functions. The ground is covered in a grey stone which contains various patterns that differentiate the different areas. Minimal natural light is let in through skylights or small panorama windows at the very top of the wall. A relaxation area is placed near the food-court complete with a fake wooden forest scenery to bring in a sense of nature and calmness.

This mall offers the opportunity to bring together two highly distinct areas of Tallinn. Redevelopments are currently taking place but the mall is still one of the main separators between these two neighborhoods.

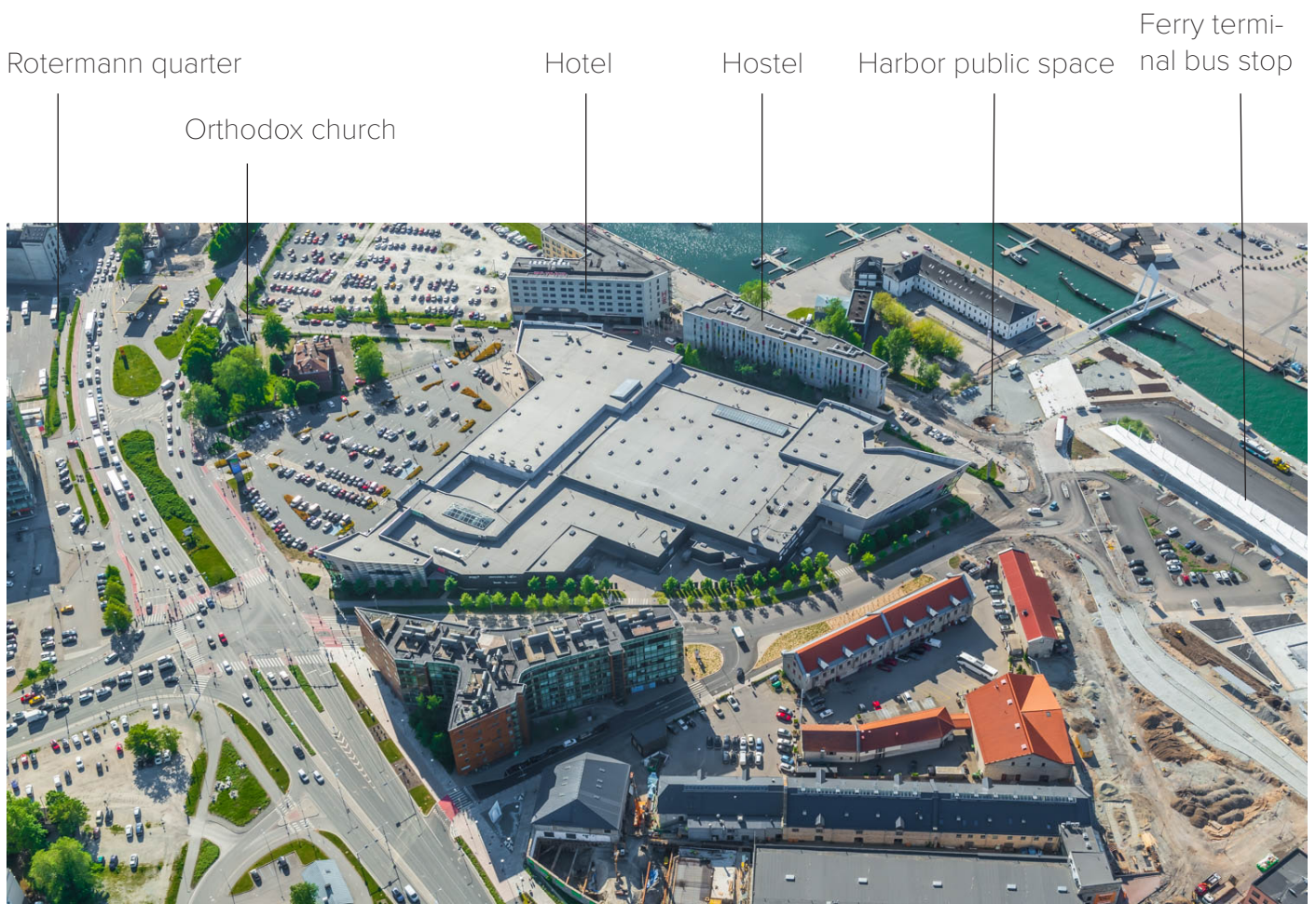


Fig. 8 - Nautica Keskus aerial view

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