

The Sociocultural Value
of Tallinn's Nightlife

*Club Culture
in a Post-Soviet Context*

MSc Architecture, Technische Universiteit Delft

Reflection 06/05/2024

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The Methods of Analysis and Imagination graduation studio 2023-2024 focuses on *A Matter of Scale*, in the North-eastern European city of Tallinn. As we were free to synthesize an in-depth site-analysis of the city with our own fascinations, I decided on exploring the Estonian nightlife. I discovered that club culture was not embraced by the city's regulations, but quite the opposite: it was pushed back. This inspired me to design a nightclub on a vacant industrial site, of which plenty is to be found in Tallinn. My choice fell upon the Balti Manufactory Quarter, a former cotton factory with its iconic chimney and monumental masonry.

It's industrial lay-out is on its way to be taken over by nature, and first plans to regenerate the area with conventional generic housing typologies are explored. My stance in this however, is to convert the site into a cultural center for the neighborhood. By clearly prioritizing culture over a strict residential use, I give back space to the sub-cultural community who loses their spaces to gentrified neighborhoods. Furthermore, by being a cultural center, the Quarter will become a catalyst for new forms of urban cultural development: in which living, working, and leisure coexist.

The Quarter is fit to accommodate this, as it is imbedded in the urban fabric and well connected to Tallinn's infrastructure. Other than that, there is enough distance between the complex and its surrounding residential neighborhood for nightlife to flourish, whilst the plot can function as a city park during the day. The nightclub is located in the former boiler room, a separate complex next to the old factory building. And just how the boiler room used to fuel the cotton factory, my nightclub will become the nocturnal heart of the new center for culture, creation, and living.

Social, Academic & Ethical Aspects

Tallinn is financially dominated by the gray suits of the IT-sector and the developers who gentrify the city. As part of the *laissez-faire* culture in Tallinn, these developers can mostly develop what they want and where they please. As a consequence, subcultural places are demolished and not to be replaced. This makes a social response even more urgent, to create a space where subcultures are allowed to be and thrive. This project is designed with the *homo ludens* in mind: a person who is free from work, and free from restrictions. This is exactly what the project gives back to Tallinn, a place where one is free to roam and stand where they want. And isn't a place designed for fun exactly what this city needs, especially during its long winter nights?

Aside from the *homo ludens* concept, other social aspects were also taken into account in the design. Among them is the fact that during the winter, people dress up very warm and accordingly to maneuver through the snow. They do wish to dress up for parties though, and the cold weather does not prevent them from doing so. So, to enable people to change clothes inside, the ground floor is reserved for this purpose. This includes an attended wardrobe, lockers, and benches for one to change from snow boots to sneakers.

An ethical aspect to consider, is that my proposal is on a heritage site. Although I do preserve the facades, I do believe that by building within and on top of these protected sites, we can build something new and allow culture to progress.

Research & Design

At the start of the project, I proposed a research plan wherein literature and conducting interviews played a big role. I conducted inspiring interviews with people who were engaged in club culture (*a DJ, club manager, sound engineer, the house architect of Paradiso, and a founder of Minimal Collective*). Besides, I experienced the nightlife of Amsterdam, Tallinn and Berlin more consciously, with the literature on club culture and nightlife in the back of my mind.

This research on club culture in former industrial sites and field work on club-atmospheres taught me the importance of being able to wander, the notion to see and be seen, DIY-culture, and lastly: to view the project as a leisure machine, operating day and night.

As (sub-cultural) club culture has historically thrived in abandoned spaces like vacant industrial sites, my decision to select the Balti Manufactory Quarter was motivated even more. I appreciated the industrial look and feel of the environment, as it clearly shows its beauty and history through its architecture. This led to my decision

to preserve the outer facades of the boiler room complex, and to operate within those walls.

The complex is divided into four parts, based on the structure of the complex: the Passage, the Hall, the Tower and the Rooftop. The Passage functions as the entrance with a gallery and café which are open day and night. The Passage connects and divides the dance-rooms like in a factory operating hall; different circulation circuits can be made by opening or closing off doors. The Hall (*a black box*) and the Tower (*a grid with alternating dancefloors*) provide space for dance, with their own spatial layout and architectural storytelling. The Rooftop, partly enclosed by glass, partly open in the air, serves as a place to catch a breath. By including a space in the complex for this exact purpose, visitors don't actually have to exit the building if they feel the need to escape the crowd. The Rooftop forms the visual connection to the city, as it emerges out of the Tower. At night, it resembles a lighthouse: clearly to be seen from the outside. During the day, it resembles a closed oyster: sheltering content within, only open for those who actually seek it.

Height-play is incorporated into the design, as seen in the Passage but most apparent in the Tower. By doing so, the notion to see and to be seen is weaved into the design. Interaction between music and the audience is strengthened, as well as the connection between the visitors themselves.

Another important aspect of the design, is that it facilitates the DIY-aspect of club culture through curation. Curation is derived from the Latin *curare*, to take care. This meaning has evolved into the looking after, and presenting collections of art and artefacts. Critic and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist describes that curation can be seen as '*a mass medium and a ritual*', where the curator arranges an event or exhibition in a manner that it transforms into an immersive experience rather than merely a gathering of performances and art. Inspired by festivals which already facilitate this, like *Draaimolen Festival*, I was inspired to take this notion to the smaller scale: my proposed nightclub.

The notion of curation is specifically made apparent in the Tower, where a steel grid structure is placed inside. The structure consists of load-bearing columns and beams, and secondary beams to enhance stability and playfulness. Within this grid, the program can be filled in and adjusted towards the needs of the artists and audience, reflecting my belief that constant change is essential for club culture. This is also conveyed to the outside, with the new structure rising out of the existing complex showcasing the possibility to adapt. This grid structure started to grow after P3, as I first had a hanging structure in mind for the tower. The

design choice for a grid influenced my research, as I realized that it facilitates curation more than a hanging structure could have done, in terms of practicality and simplicity.

Final Part of Graduation Period

During the final part of the graduation period, I plan to investigate more on the design aspects I have already touched upon. As I have more than a month's time, I am optimistic how the project can reach a deeper level in the elaboration of its atmosphere.

Interior

To enhance my narrative, I want to develop the interior more thoroughly. This includes elements such as stairs and railings, and a more thorough investigation of how color and materialization can enhance the narrative of a curative nightclub through drawing and model-making, to test out different options. In addition, I have not paid much attention to light design so far. In relation to my design principle curation, I want to make several mock-ups on how the Tower can be filled in, to illustrate the possibilities of this concept.

Exterior

Besides the interior, I would like to elaborate more how the club communicates to its surroundings in its exterior dressing. The urban implications of the nightclub for the park and the conversion of the old factory will be taken into consideration as well. A model will be made to test out various options, in combination with drawings.