

Tallinn: A City for Cinema

Introduction:

Tallinn, a city with a long history of invasion and occupation, is built upon an eclectic mix of medieval and contemporary buildings surrounded by unmistakably brutalist buildings leftover from the Soviet occupation. These brutalist structures combined with the old-time charm of classical European cities make it a filmmaker's dream for dystopic storytelling. There is much to offer visually in Tallinn's cityscape. Beyond that, the outskirts of Tallinn provide plenty of untouched nature, covered with forests and bogs, with diverse terrain, spanning rocky beaches, old growth forests, lakes and even waterfalls. The city is inherently well endowed with infrastructure necessary for filmmaking. This has not gone unnoticed by filmmakers across the globe, as the city has been chosen as the backdrop for numerous award-winning films in the past directed by globally acclaimed directors such as Christopher Nolan and Andrei Tarkovsky.



Tenet (2020)
Christopher Nolan
UK and USA co-production
Linnahall, Tallinn



Stalker (1979)
Andrei Tarkovsky
Soviet production
Rotermann Quarter, Kultuurikatel,
Iru power plant, Lasnamäe, Tallinn



Lilya 4-ever (2002)
Lukas Moodysson
Swedish production
Kopli, Lasnamäe



Sügisball (2007)
Veiko Õunpuu
Estonian production
Lasnamäe

Image Source: Stills taken from above mentioned movies

Visiting Lasnamäe, Tallinn

The two-week field study completed from 1/10 – 14/10 in Tallinn, Estonia was completed in three parts: 1. Group research on the district of Lasnamäe 2. Disciplinary Analysis 3. Research on individual interests. The result of part 1 and 2 can be found in **Appendix A** to serve as reference for this research plan.

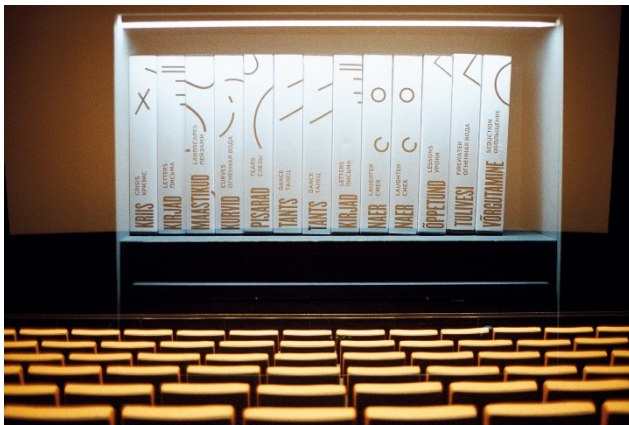
Since before the trip, research on articles, events, and writings on Lasnamäe have consistently referred to it as depressive and dangerous. There are certain stereotypes bound to it. The movie Autumn ball (Sügisball), despite the original novel taking place in Mustamae another district with

Soviet housing in Tallinn. The director made the choice of filming in Lasnamäe, as he believed the district is the ultimate expression of angst representative of the mid-noughties (Kaer, 2014).

Interestingly, despite the negative reputation, fieldwork in Lasnamäe for two weeks has felt relatively safe. It is apparent that times have changed and there are certainly sprouting initiatives from both the state and local NGOs to improve the quality of public spaces such as providing parks and indoor sports infrastructure.

A visit to the Estonian film museum

In the way Hollywood in Los Angeles is synonymous of the American film and TV industry, Tallinn perhaps have a similar potential. To investigate this, a visit was made to the Estonian Film Museum located at Pirita tee 56, next to the Memorial to the Victims of Communism. The museum was only recently completed in 2017 by BOA architects (ajaloomuuseum, n.d).



Overlay of empty cinema and CD exhibits in Estonian Film museum



Exterior shot of Estonian film museum



Exterior shot of the “red carpet” park of the museum



Interior shot of museum exhibition

Image Source: Author's own images

Despite the resources available in Tallinn as a filmmaker's ground, and the numerous movies that have been shot in Tallinn by local production companies and foreign ones, the film museum of Tallinn interestingly chose to curate a rather conservative exhibition on film making equipment and filmmaking processes. After consulting the museum guide, it was learned that the museum does in fact aim to showcase the art of filmmaking nonspecific to any country or region. The museum was also rather empty during my visit, with only two other guests beside me, despite the obvious effort and investment that has been made to this newly built museum area. It was a disappointing visit to the film museum; however, it indicated the potential and interest of filmmaking in the city, but perhaps missing content to fill the museum.

The following research questions are drafted to investigate the potential of an architectural project in Lasnamäe that stimulates film production in Tallinn.

Research Question:

What kind of community is Lasnamäe today? What kind of social events happen there? What is the demographic of people living there?

What are the art and culture initiatives in Lasnamäe?

How do films produce and reproduce the image of Tallinn? How do these films impact everyday experiences and perceptions of the city we live in?

What are the architectural and social potentials of Lasnamäe for filmmaking? Where are the existing spaces in the city that facilitate film making? Are they sufficient?

Who are the stakeholders involved in the filmmaking process? What can Tallinn offer them and what can they offer to the city?

Methodology:

1. Double exposure photography

While exploring Tallinn, specifically focusing on the district of Lasnamäe, the methodology of double exposure photography was used to capture observed elements that are worthy of comparison. This technique allows for mindful exploration and helps compose themes worthy of analysis.



Overlay of casino entrance with interior of alcohol shop in Mustakivi, Lasnamäe



Overlay of basement shops in Soviet block with flags of chain supermarket Rimi in Laagna, Lasnamäe



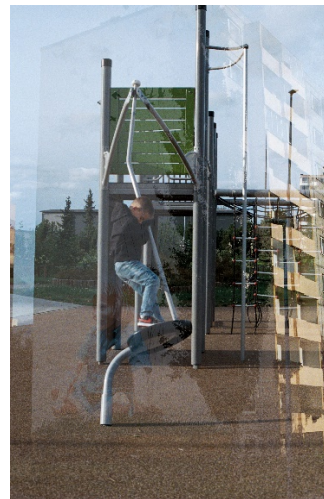
*Overlay of Estonian National Opera with Rimi supermarket at the center of Laagna district
Image Source: Author's own images*

This method provided great results for the group research regarding the comparative analysis between Saarinen and Soviet planning, these can be seen in **Appendix A**. It was also observed in Lasnamäe that there is a powerful theme of excess consumption in any built structure that is not for housing, much of the empty spaces the Soviet have left behind in their unfinished masterplan have become stores or even malls. These stores are repetitive and are often chain grocery stores such as Rimi, Maxima, COOP or Prisma. In an interview made with the Lasnamäe district administration, it was mentioned that consumption habits in Lasnamäe have transformed from a time where “there wasn’t much to buy, and not much money to buy it, now, there is too much supply and not enough demand for it” (Sarapur, 2023). Unfortunately, there are few indoor spaces found in Lasnamäe dedicated for social purposes, even choices of restaurants are limited to two or three fast food chains in each micro-district.

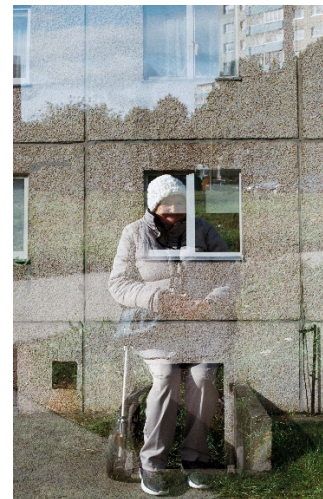
As for the social demographic and everyday life in Lasnamäe, it was observed there that the district is heavily populated by elderly people who inhabit the streets for much of the day by buying groceries and returning home, as well as young children playing in the parks and courtyards.



Overlay of elderly's movement with children's movement of in Mustakivi, Lasnamäe



Overlay of children playing in newly made park with mural painted on Soviet block façade in Mustakivi, Lasnamäe



Overlay of elderly taking a break with façade of Soviet block in Mustakivi, Lasnamäe



Overlay of elderly taking a break carrying groceries with street furniture in Mustakivi, Lasnamäe

Image Source: Author's own images

While exploring Lasnamäe during the fieldwork, it became obvious the attraction of Tallinn for cinema. The Soviet heritage, with its massive highway lined by cracked and exposed limestone, empty wastelands, and the monotonous and repetitive beige housing blocks, holds a certain angst. This is layered with the bold and vibrant newly built commercial centers, warehouse style grocery stores, global fast-food chains, and brightly lit casino entrances. Lasnamäe is a language of its own, ideal for creating surrealist imagery in film and the perfect backdrop for art films with a dystopic taste.

2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted while in Tallinn with several local organizations to get a better understanding of the film industry, and of Lasnamäe. The following interviews were conducted in Tallin.

1. Lasnamäe district administration, City management unit

Questions regarding Lasnamäe in the past and present were asked in this interview. The questions can be found in **Appendix B**. Below is a summary of the interview.

- Transport to Lasnamäe by bus is quite efficient and much quicker than a tram.
- There are no spaces to hang out, people would go to the city centre to meet their friends.
- There are far too many shops and are often empty because there is not enough demand for the supply.
- Restaurants and bars do not believe in opening a shop in Lasnamäe because they don't believe it will be successful.
- The city government has been building parks in recent years, there are too many parks now in Lasnamäe.
- Due to privatization, renovation and reparation is all decided by the housing committee, government subsidies very little of the costs.
- All in between spaces of the housing blocks are owned by the city, therefore, must be maintained by the city to provide adequate public spaces for the people.

2. Ministry of culture, Advisor on Architecture and Design

The interview was to collect a better understanding of the cultural scene of Tallinn post-Soviet occupation. Questions used for the interview can be found in **Appendix C**. Below is a summary of key points collected from the interview.

Film

A film pavilion has been requested by the film industry for years now, and in 2022 it was chosen as a top priority project by the state. Competition and planning for the film pavilion have been in progress and there is already a site chosen at Paljassaare tee 17. The chosen neighborhood is mostly uninhabited and surrounded by two story Stalinist buildings.

Art during Soviet times

During Soviet times, official art existed in institutional form, artists that were supported by the state were supported generously, with heavy censorship and little creative freedom. In Lasnamäe there are Soviet blocks designed with artist studios in mind on the top floor.



*Image of Soviet housing block with artist studio on top floor
Image Source: Author's own images*

Cultural initiative in Lasnamäe

The pink Lasnamäe paviljon in Laagna, is the first seed sowed for cultural potential in Lasnamäe. It is located next to the Soviet blocks with the artist studios, there is a certain synergy for art in that area.



Overlay of Lasnamäe pavilion with Soviet block with artist studio



*Overlay of Soviet block with artist studio with posters of Lasnamäe pavilion
Image Source: Author's own images*

Renovation marathon for the Soviet Blocks

Tallinn's former chief architect Endrik Mänd warned that “time is running out for the aging, Soviet-era apartment blocks”, since “they were hastily built and are becoming uninhabitable in a relatively short period of time” (Kaer, 2014). There are plans for a “renovation marathon” for the Soviet blocks of Lasnamäe, Mustamäe and Õismäe districts. There will be investments of 350million coming each from the EU, the private sector of Tallinn and from the taxes paid by the citizens to renovate.

3. Museum of Estonian architecture, Curator

The curator grew up in Lasnamäe and shared stories of her childhood as well as her viewpoint on how it is developing.

- Lasnamäe is a good example of how a city is developing in a good way.
- Lasnamäe has a problem of not considering human scale, especially in its public spaces. Travelling by foot is uneasy as one may need to travel along highways to reach a shop.
- There is a lack of museum culture in Tallinn, which may explain the empty museums.
- Lasnamäe heavily lacks cultural spaces.

4. Lasnaidee, NGO working in Lasnamäe, Event planner

Lasnaidee is a nonprofit that encourages community participation in Lasnamäe to improve the living environment. It values “Lasnamäe as an already pleasant living environment” with “its own values” (*lasnaidee, n.d*).

Open air cinema

Lasnaidee organizes annual open air cinema events called Lasnakino, free for the public. They have hosted the event for years in open spaces such as Kivila park, Laagna garden, Liikuri, Lawn on Arba, Pae Park, Tondilo park, and in open fields in Mustakivi (Ledzep, 2022). The activity is aimed at increasing awareness and motivation of residents to diversify urban space and increase the sense of belonging.



Image Source: Ledzep, 2022

5. Film production, Set designer.

The interview was done to understand the landscape of filmmaking culture in Tallinn. Below is a summary of points.

- Very few black boxes for making film sets and the ones that exist are often booked up.
- There are companies that find indoor spaces such as vacant houses for making film sets.
- There is a lot of nature in Estonia, great for filmmaking, but there are no large indoor production sets.

3. Visiting Archives

To better understand the layout of Soviet blocks in Lasnamäe and any potential for adaptive reuse, I have completed my disciplinary analysis on one of the housing blocks. Archive research at the city archive of Tallinn gave me access to these drawings, the analysis can be found in **Appendix A**.

Further Research:

To better answer more of the research questions regarding the filmmaking industry in what they can offer to a city. I would investigate further case studies on Cinecitta Studio in Rome. The studio has created over three thousand movies since its establishment eighty years ago.



Image Source: Cinecittastudios

Tenet (2020)



Stalker (1979)



Sügisball (2007)



Lilya 4-ever (2002)



Infrastructure for film



Collection of stills captured from movies made in Tallinn and infrastructure for film available in Tallinn

Conclusion:

Infrastructure for filmmaking in Tallinn is not a novel idea, it has been in demand for years. However, the location selected by the state seems to be a missed opportunity for introducing an active industry into one of the more populated districts of Tallinn. I would like to propose an architectural project for a film production house in Lasnamäe. The spatial qualities of Lasnamäe are incredibly stimulating and provocative, it has a Soviet history of housing artist studios, there are budding art and culture initiatives in recent years, not to mention the award-winning films that took inspiration and were filmed in this district. The introduction of a production industry into the 'sleeping district' of Lasnamäe may serve as a counterbalance to the current phenomenon of excessive consumerist architectural tendencies. It will provide a reason for those who do not live in Lasnamäe to visit it. In the same way that films can produce and reproduce the image of a city, hopefully the addition of a filmmaking industry can improve everyday experiences, thus, alter the negative perception and depressing image of Lasnamäe.

The challenge for the project would be about scale, and designing in a way that controls the architecturally substantial filmmaking infrastructure to one that is tangible on the human level. It is crucial to avoid adding to the existing collection of architectural projects in Lasnamäe that have neglected the human scale, whether it be the Soviet's massive highway and housing blocks, or the capitalists' excessive warehouse grocery stores with signs so massive they can only be seen fully from the entrance of the carpark.

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Kaer, K. (2014, June 24). Lasnamäe - the final frontier? ERR. Retrieved November 9, 2023, from <https://news.err.ee/112883/lasnamae-the-final-frontier>

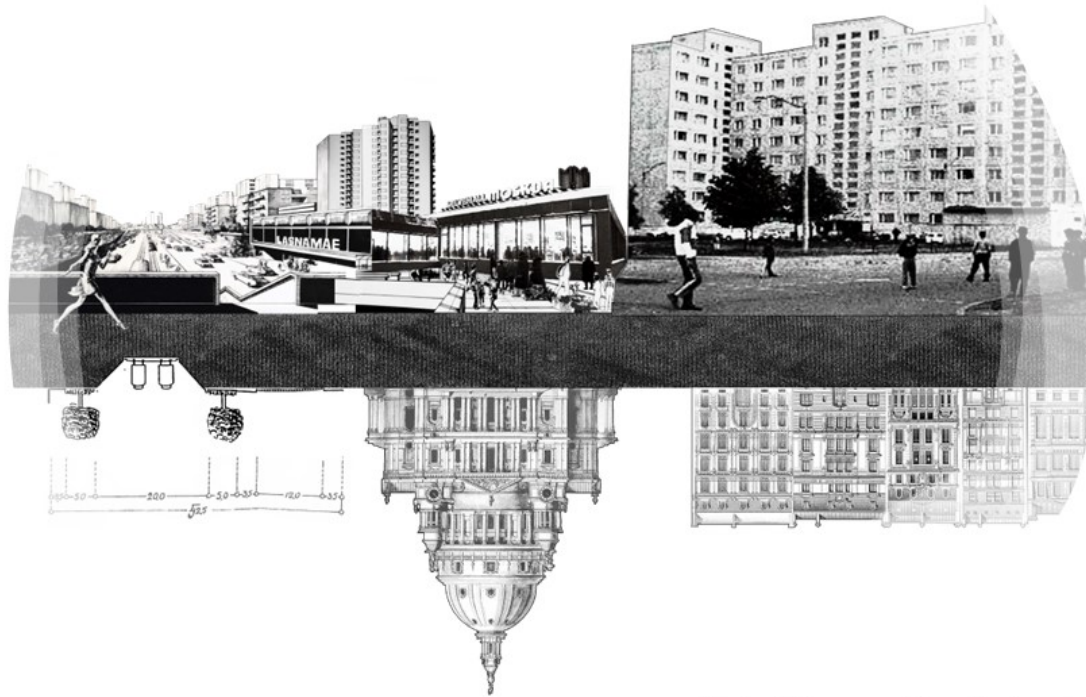
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Appendix:

Appendix A: Group research in Lasnamäe (with Ke Ling Neoh and Alessia Sanchez)

The Promise of Lasnamäe



Line 4
Mabel Cheung, Alessia Angela Sanchez, Ke Ling Neoh

< The Promise of Lasnamae >

Saarinen's Utopia



Soviet's Utopia



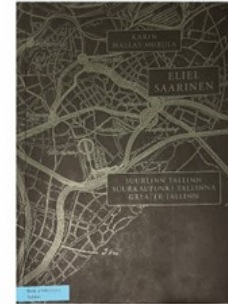
1913
Lasnamae planned as an upper middle class neighborhood, part of master plan for Greater Tallin. Designed by the Finnish architect for the Estonians.

1940
Disruption: Estonia unlawfully declared Estonia SSR, incorporated into the Soviet Union.

1970s
The Soviets developed plans for Lasnamae to house workers for industrial sectors, these housing were either 5 or 9 storey tall buildings made from prefab concrete panels.

1970 - 1991
Disruption: Wars and low construction funds created the bare minimum "sleep district" of Lasnamae.

1991 - now
After the fall of USSR in 1991, land and housing was privatised. Unbuilt land became valuable for capitalist gain, transforming Lasnamae into a district of carparks and malls.

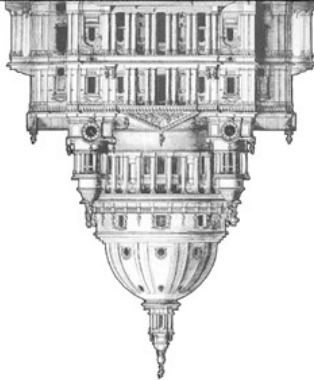
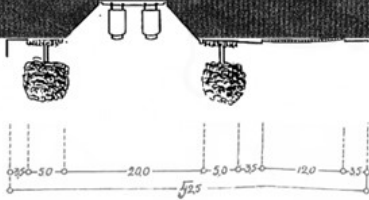


Laagna Tee

Centre

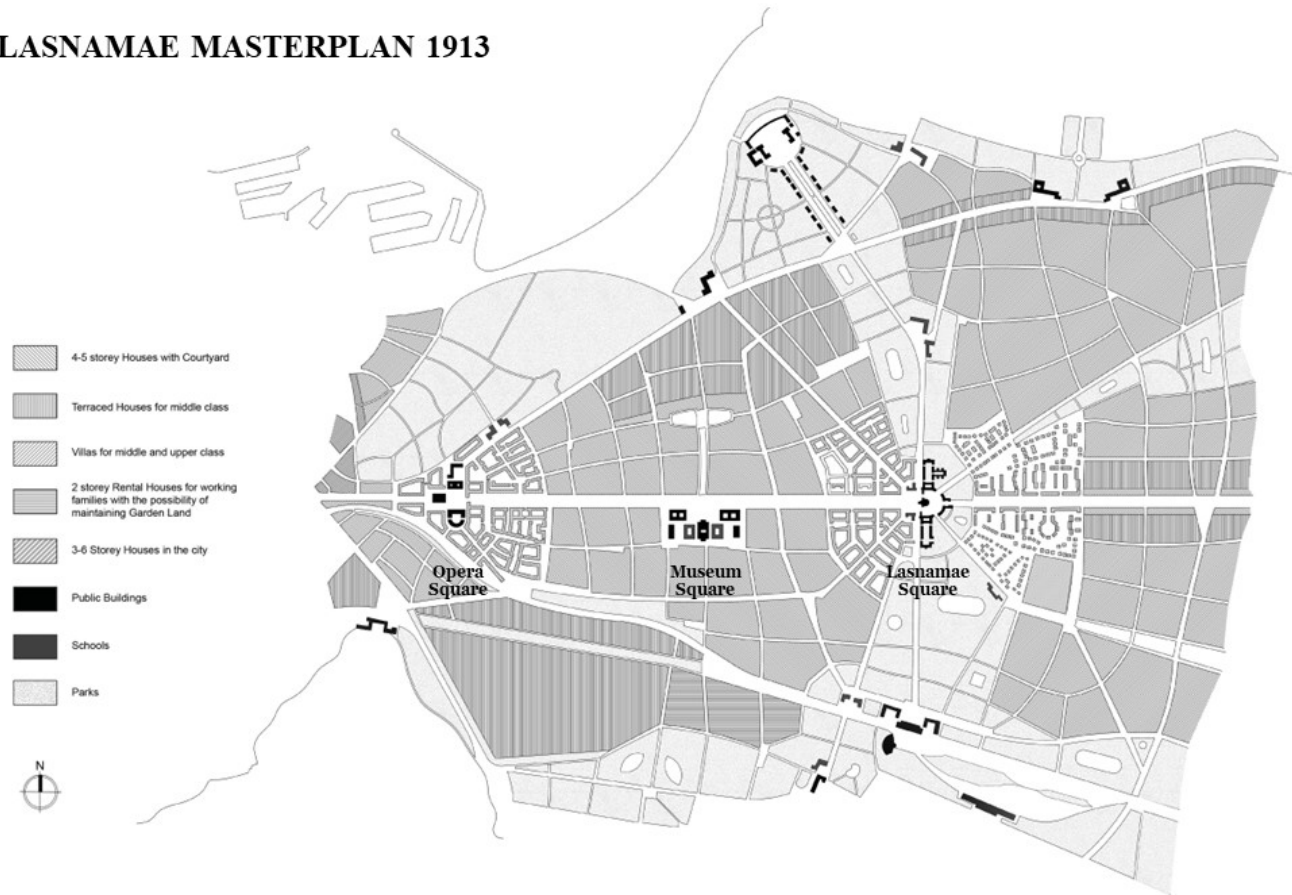
Housing

Soviet's



Sartinen's

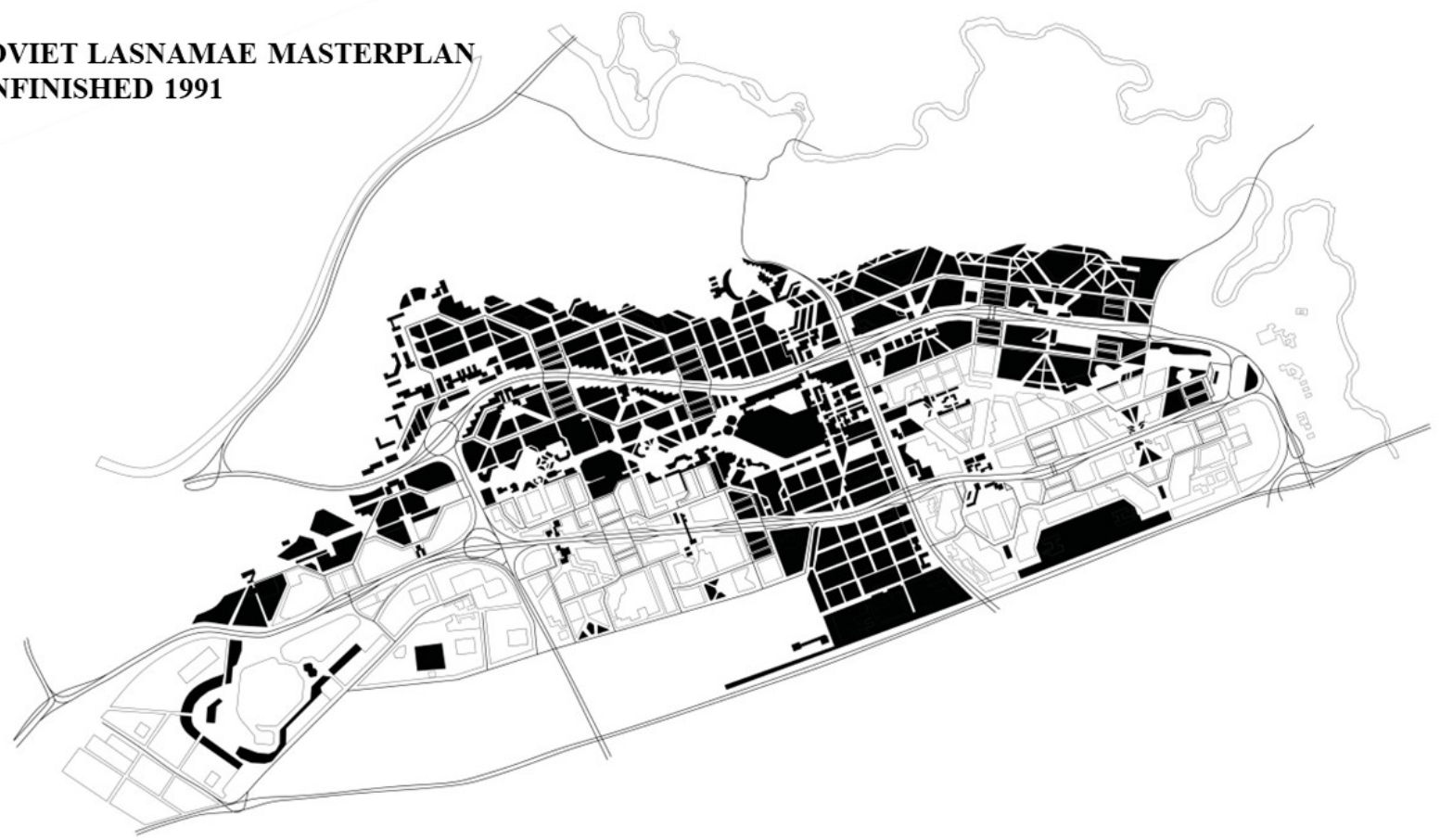
SAARINEN LASNAMAE MASTERPLAN 1913



**SOVIET LASNAMAE
MASTERPLAN 1970s**



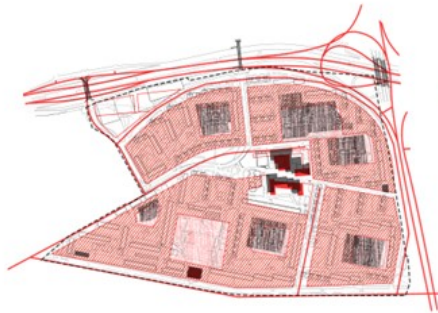
**SOVIET LASNAMAE MASTERPLAN
UNFINISHED 1991**



**SOVIET AND SAARINEN
MASTERPLAN OVERLAP
WITH TODAY LASNAMAE
PLAN**



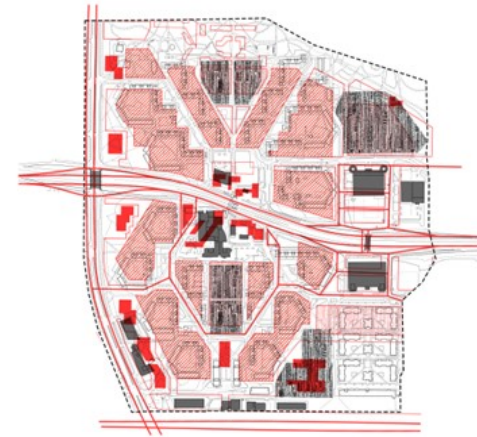
SUBDISTRICTS



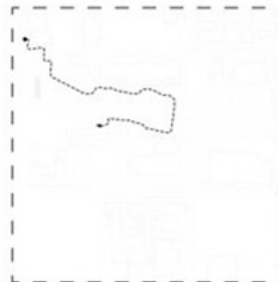
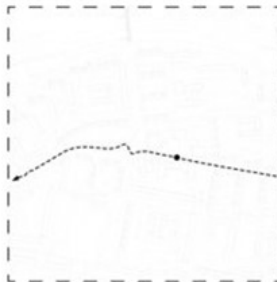
Pae
Completely built



Tondiraba
Not built

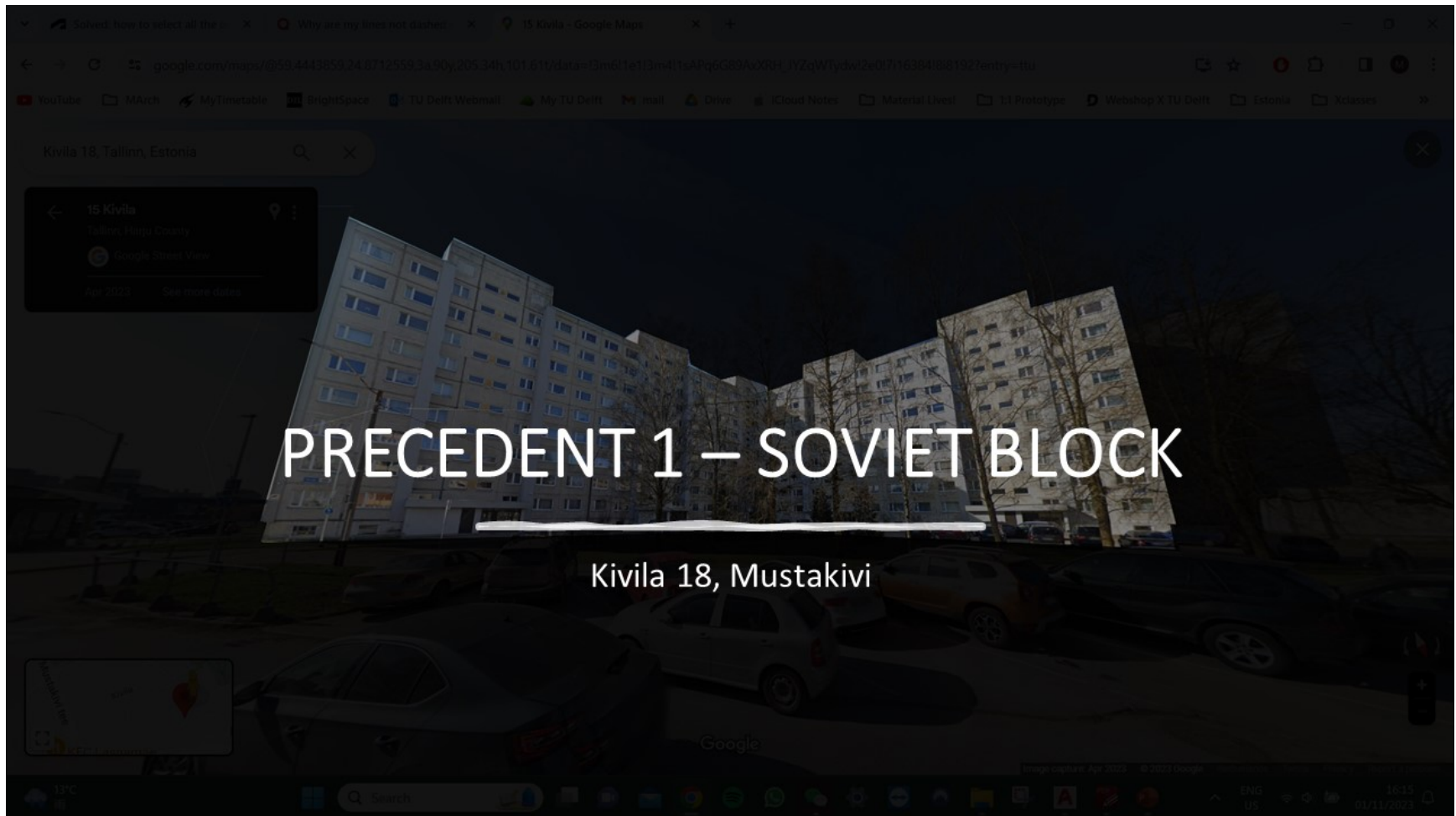


Mustakivi
Half built



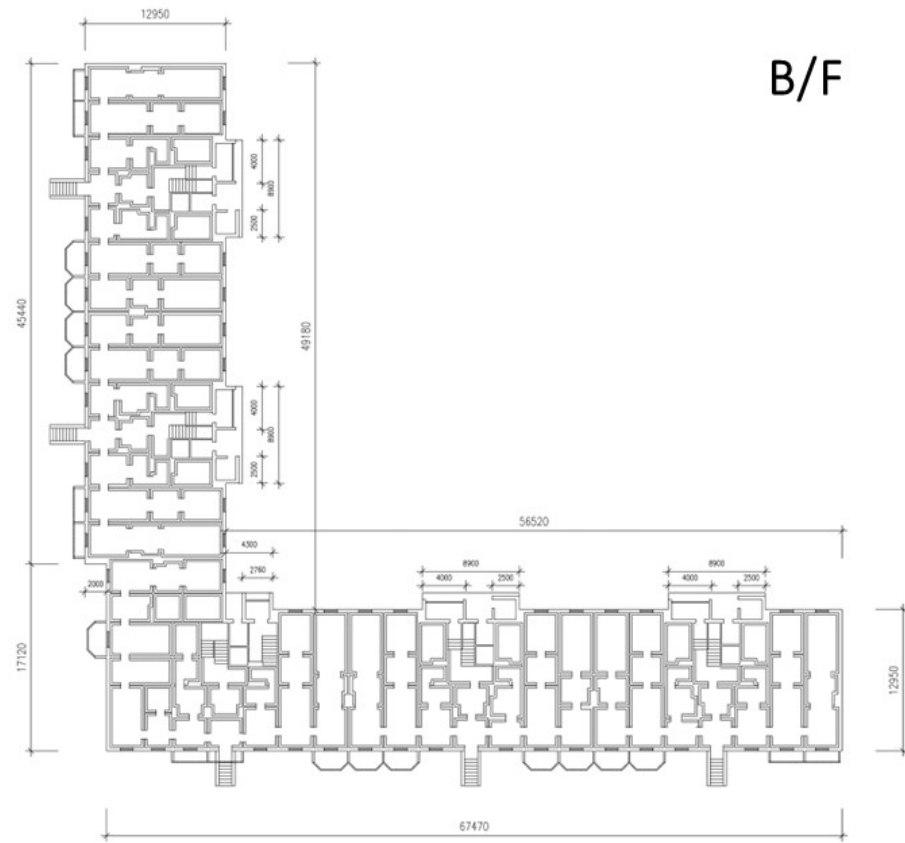
PRECEDENT 1 – SOVIET BLOCK

Kivila 18, Mustakivi

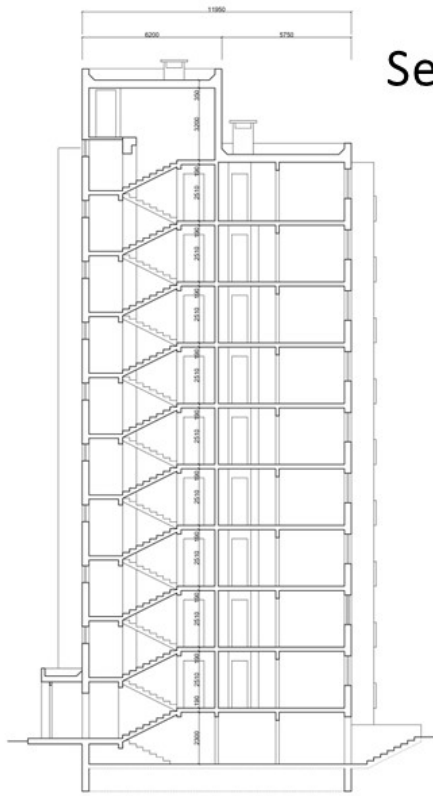




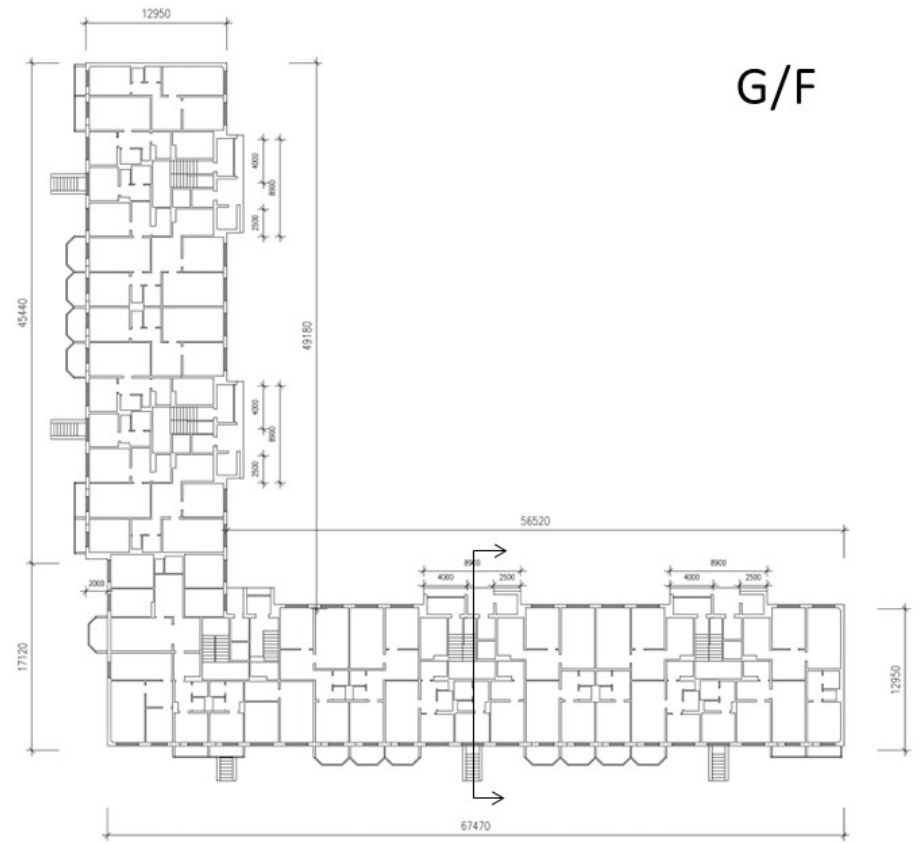
Source: Vladimir Ljadov, 2015



B/F



Section

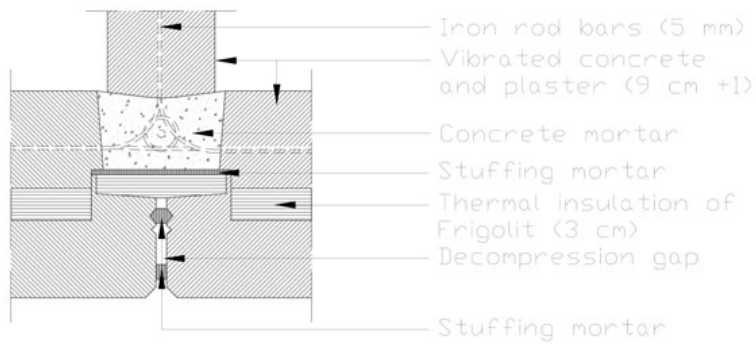


G/F

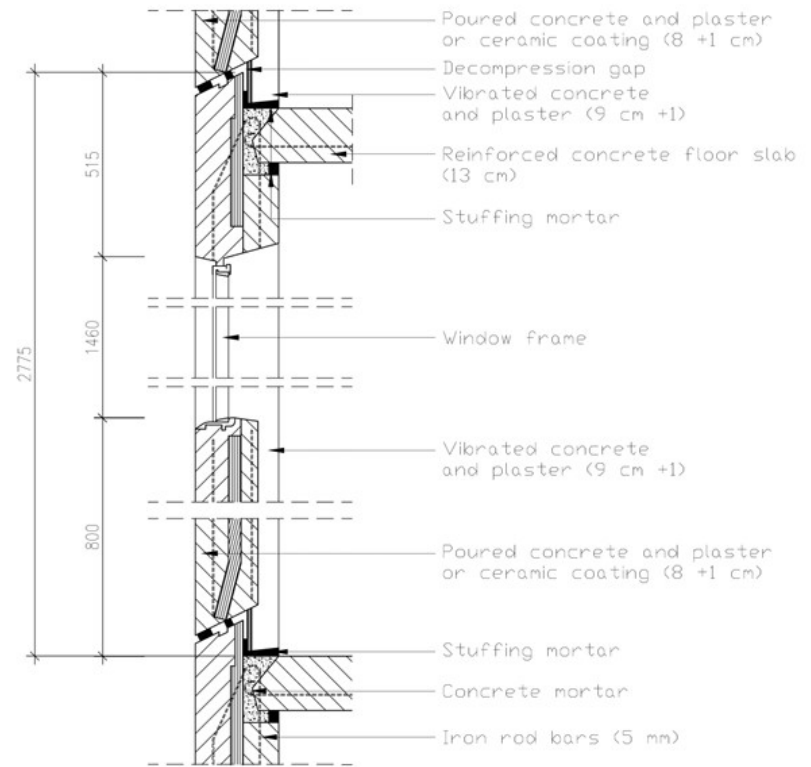


The Camus Process

The Soviet Union lagged behind in technological development compared to western European countries. In the late 1950s adopted the French methods designed by the French engineer Raymond Camus in 1948.

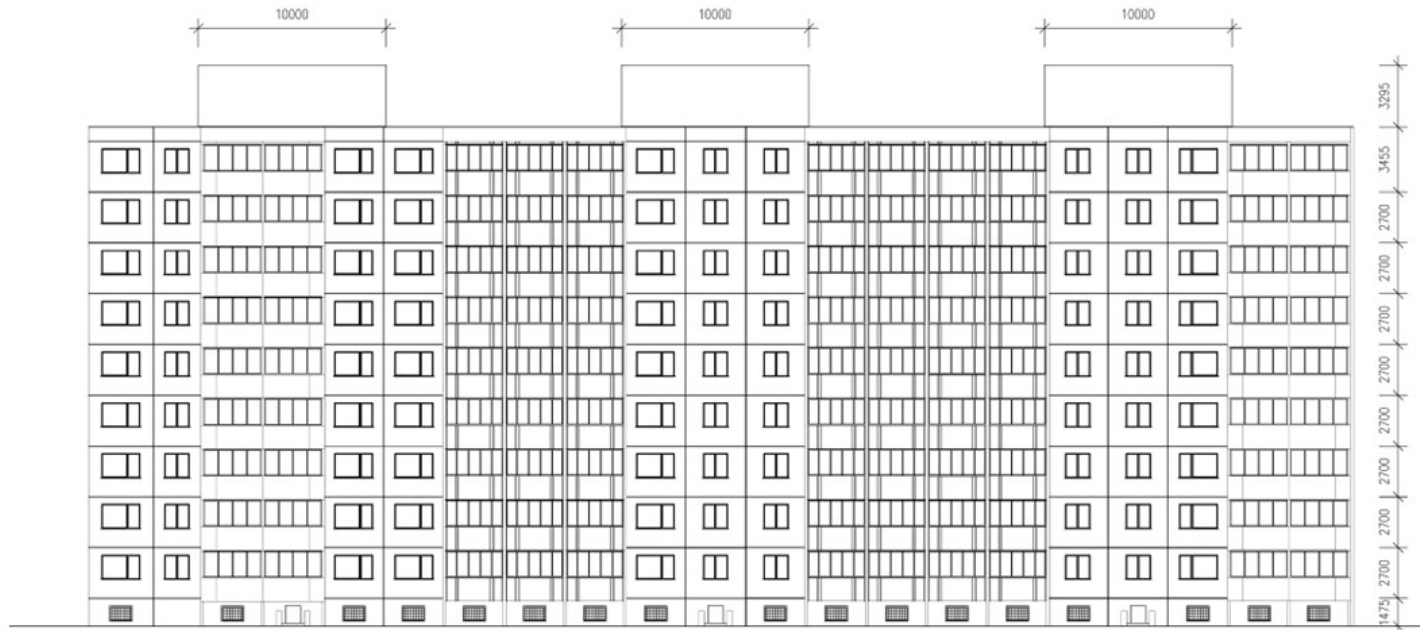


Detail_Wall to Wall



Section_Wall to Slab

Elevation



Appendix B: Interview Questions for Lasnamäe City District Administration

For Residents

For older people who lived through USSR occupation:

What were your memories of those days under Soviet occupation? What was your role then (factory worker, seastress etc.)?

Where would you go after work? What was Lasnamäe to you (just a bed, did you socialise here)?

How were the relations between Russians and Estonians during USSR rule, how did that change today?

For general people (In Lasnamäe)

Can you describe your daily routine in Lasnamäe? What are your favorite places to visit within the district?

What do you think are the most significant architectural features or landmarks in Lasnamäe?

Are there any historical or cultural aspects of Lasnamäe that you find particularly important or interesting?

How do you feel about the overall aesthetics and visual appeal of the district? Are there any areas that you believe need improvement?

What transportation options do you use to navigate Lasnamäe, and what are your thoughts on their accessibility and convenience?

Are there any public spaces or parks in Lasnamäe that you enjoy or feel could be improved for community use?

How does the availability of shops, restaurants, and other services affect your daily life in Lasnamäe?

Are there any challenges or issues related to housing or infrastructure that you've personally experienced or observed in the district?

What are your thoughts on the sense of community and social interactions in Lasnamäe? Are there opportunities for community engagement and social activities?

Can you share your perspective on the cultural diversity and inclusivity within Lasnamäe? How do you feel about the mix of cultures and backgrounds in the district?

Are there any environmental concerns or sustainability initiatives in Lasnamäe that you think should be addressed in the architectural project?

How do you envision the future of Lasnamäe in terms of urban development, architecture, and community life?

Are there any specific features or facilities you believe are lacking in Lasnamäe that would improve the quality of life for residents?

Have you experienced any issues related to safety or security in Lasnamäe? What suggestions do you have for enhancing safety measures?

Are there any unique cultural traditions or events in Lasnamäe that you believe should be preserved or promoted through the architectural project?

How would you compare Lasnamäe to the rest of Tallinn?

General people (outside of Lasnamäe)

How do you view Lasnamäe?

How would you compare Lasnamäe to the rest of Tallinn?

Do you visit Lasnamäe often?

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Cultural Ministry

What would you describe as the most defining cultural event or element in Tallinn?

Since regaining independence how would you describe the cultural scene in Estonia? How has the city adapted culturally in terms of building museums, cultural centres and concert halls?

There are plenty of gentrification and repurposing of historic buildings in Tallinn into artist space such as the repurposing of the sea plane hangar, what do you think of those projects?

I noticed there are quite a few international and local movies filmed in Tallinn, for example Tenet directed by Christopher Nolan and Sugisball Veiko Ounpuu, staged in Linahall and Lasnamae. What do you think of the potential of local film industry?

Are there any plans of developing more culturally in Lasnamae?

I know that music is very important and played an influential role in the culture and heritage of Estonia, are there any other cultural elements the city is looking to invest in such as arts/film/crafts etc?