

Reimagining Kopli

a multifaceted strategy to urban revitalization in Tallinn

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Introduction

This reflection is conceived as a means to explore specific questions that have emerged during the design process—questions that appeared while engaging with the project. Although some of these inquiries may not be immediately apparent in the project, they have definitely influenced the decision-making and, as a result, shaped the final design.

Albeit the design-oriented approach that explores and learns through the process of designing, this investigation is underpinned by foundational theoretical knowledge that supports design decisions. As a reflection of that, this text is organized into four brief reflections, each touching on an aspect relevant to the design. Despite the clear delineation of these topics, the subjects frequently intersect and overlap. The purpose of this written piece is to articulate and clarify the underlying principles of the project. In a final and more ambitious instance, this is an attempt to understand the fundamental purposes of the architect's role but also to explore new ways of thinking about architecture as a way of challenging pre-conceived ideas and suggesting possible ways to address current problems.

In essence, this research arises from an interest in the ordinary and results in a combined architectural strategy composed of three buildings and the space “in-between.” The interest in the mundane worked as a way of having a more human-centered approach in order to respond to more significant problems in the city.

Situated in the city of Tallinn, more specifically in the Kopli neighborhood, the present proposition is a way of dealing locally, with small interventions, but that, as a group, has a more significant impact in the city.

Certainly, the questions raised do not find a single answer. This research represents just one way of seeing and understanding architecture and, especially in the design exercise, a way to communicate the answers found.

A matter of the everyday

“Why be interested in the ordinary when the majority of the architectural world is interested only in the exceptional? Because commonplaces are the most constructed places and the closest to the lives of the mass of people, who often judge architecture in terms of the mundane buildings they encounter daily.” (Avermaete, 2006, p. 66)

Commonly, the ordinary is overlooked and deemed insufficiently valuable for exploration, not just in architecture but across various fields of knowledge. However, the need to value the ordinary is pivotal, especially in a humanistic field such as architecture. With a refined and careful look, architecture becomes more than just the formulation of buildings. It becomes a nuanced approach to enhancing human interaction, supporting cultural expression, and fulfilling the practical needs of daily life. This approach bridges the gap between aesthetic values and functional necessities, making architecture a truly integrative discipline.

In this sense, the work of Atelier Bow Wow’s “Made in Tokyo” or “Learning from Las Vegas” by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, which focuses on the everyday and the non-canonical, unveils intricate underlying knowledge. This perspective highlights the value of common knowledge—insights generated by everyday people rather than specialists. It shows that there is something valuable to be learned in the type of architecture that is normally overlooked or forgotten.

This project emphasizes everyday practices, mainly focusing on strategically placed functions and buildings that improve walkability and the overall quality of life in the city. In this regard, the proposal includes a bakery, a sauna, and a local movie theater, emphasizing that these mundane architectures should be designed respectfully and acknowledging their significance within the broader urban context.

In this framework, activities that might be considered out of the ordinary, such as going to the cinema, are reimagined as vehicles to dissolve such distinctions. The way in which the cinema’s scale is developed suggests that it should be regarded as an ordinary activity, as routine as going to the grocery store, for example. Similarly, the sauna project is designed to be part of daily life and not as an extraordinary event. Finally, the bakery, by its essence, is part of everyday practices. The intention is not to create something magnificent or monumental. Instead, the goal is for these spaces to blend seamlessly into people’s lives so that they are not even recognized as architectural entities but as the built environment that facilitates life.

A matter of urbanity

The multifaceted strategy of this project is rooted in the understanding that diverse actions are essential to enhance urban life. Thus, the project is not confined to a general master plan or an isolated building proposal. Instead, it consists of three small-scale buildings designed to contribute to a larger goal: enhancing the urban fabric. Presenting these buildings together is crucial, as collectively, they embody a broader significance and provide a more profound reflection on the city and its future possibilities.

“Project acupuncture is less concerned with the small, the minute or the delicate than with the strategic, the systemic and the interdependent. Actions performed on the ear, the Chinese experts say, will have beneficial effects on the lung or the knee. Acupuncture is above all about a much higher appreciation of the epidermis as a rich, complex and enormously influential membrane.” (De Solà-Morales & Frampton, 2008, p.26)

This approach enables a more nuanced and complex reflection and imagination of the city. It acknowledges that a city’s richness derives from many factors—not just its buildings but also the spaces between them and the life that happens within them. Indeed, the “in-between” spaces are a critical focus of this study. Particularly in Tallinn’s urban fabric, there is generally a perception of fragmentation and a lack of unity, underscoring the importance of examining these in-between spaces.

Because of that, both the building designs and the spaces between them are crucial in cultivating a collective neighborhood atmosphere. As Jane Jacobs observed,

“The trust of a city street is formed over time from many little public sidewalk contacts. It grows out of people stopping by at the bar for a beer, getting advice from the grocer and giving advice to the newsstand man, comparing opinions with other customers at the bakery [...] The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level [...] is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need.” (Jacobs, 1992, p.56)

In particular, the design approach towards the in-between spaces was based on the logic of giving something back to the city. Even though private agencies might develop the three buildings, they can still profoundly influence urban life. A clear example is the cinema, where the adjacent square mirrors the interior dimensions of the movie theater. This design choice, what Jaime Lerner might describe as “urban kindness,” Lerner (2014) symbolizes and actualizes the architect’s role in offering gestures of urban kindness through thoughtful design.

Around both the sauna and the bakery, public spaces were designed to create a cohesive environment that enriches neighborhood life, promotes walkability, and fosters a sense of community. These areas are intended to blend seamlessly with their surroundings, enhancing the local urban fabric and contributing to the overall vitality of the area.

A matter of scale

The notion of “scale” inherently involves a comparison: specific dimensions are set as references to establish relationships with other things. Commonly used units of measurement, such as meters, centimeters, and inches, are typical standards of reference. In fact, the imperial system (inches, feet) echoes the historical practice of using human body proportions as the basis for measurement.

However, it is common for dimensions to become abstract. In architecture, scales are frequently taken for granted, with little reflection on the standards used as references. This is precisely what Le Corbusier’s Modulor system addresses. In an era of increasing industrialization and standardization, Le Corbusier introduced a measurement system that emphasizes the importance of considering human proportions in design. It is crucial to recognize that the choice of a measurement unit is a deliberate decision that significantly influences the outcome of an architectural project.

The interplay between these scales results in a framework that can be more or less sophisticated but contributes to constructing a set of ideas that gives greater meaning to the proposed project. As Alvaro Siza argues, “Thus, in my opinion, the two exercises, or rather the three, are indispensable: to imagine the city, to imagine the building, to imagine the furniture. Each one of these activities depends on the others.” (Siza, 2021, p.121)

In this sense, and especially relating to this particular project. The three scales (city, building, and detail) form an

interdependent relationship; that is, it is only possible to design the building by considering the city or to design the furniture relating it to its context.

The urban scale offers a comprehensive view and understanding of the territory. Designing the urban fabric is crucial for grasping the dynamics and conflicts inherent in a given area. As Frampton recognizes, “In this regard, Critical Regionalism manifests itself as a consciously bounded architecture, one which rather than emphasizing the building as a free-standing object places the stress on the territory to be established by the structure erected on the site. This ‘place-form’ means that the architect must recognize the physical boundary of his work as a kind of temporal limit – the point at which the present act of building stops.” (Frampton, 2020, p.327)

In that sense, an architectural project is a response to a specific condition embedded in a particular discourse. In this project, the scale of the buildings allows to think about functions, users, shapes, and materials. This perspective emphasizes that design decisions are not made in isolation but are deeply influenced by the surrounding environment and intended interactions. By carefully considering the scale, the project aligns with the needs and dynamics of the local community, fostering a more integrated and functional urban landscape.

More than that, a critical aspect of the design development was meticulously envisioning how the spaces would be used. This exercise established the “reference measure” or “scale,” a foundational guideline for the entire design process.

Finally, focusing through a more detailed lens enables the object's scale to materialize an imagined solution. It is through detailing, through imagining how a screw connects two pieces of wood, for example, that the realization of an idea can be attested.

In this regard, Peter Zumthor clearly expresses: “Details are, in fact, not only the key to the realization of a particular project, but they also lead to an understanding of the whole of which they are an inherent part.” (Zumthor, 2010, p. 15)

Building on this, detailing in this project took on an additional, distinctly humanistic approach. Beyond technical specifications, the details were designed to engage the tactile senses. This humanistic element enables the creation of aesthetically pleasing and functional details and enhances the interaction between the human body and the built environment.

Hence, the interchange of scales was crucial throughout the project development to create a holistic and integrative design. Moreover, the human experience served as a critical element in setting the tone and emphasizing the focus of the project, which is precisely on enhancing human interactions and experiences.

A matter of time

The discussion about time in architecture is, in essence, a material question. The passage of time is revealed on surfaces—a newly painted wall is easily distinguished from a stony, moist wall where moss grows. Time, an abstract concept, can be materialized shortly. The dichotomy between old and new is part of the inherited condition of cities—layers of history overlap in the built environment. As Rossi (1984) defines it, they (layers) appear as a primordial and eternal fabric of life.

Despite the innate character of layering history, the cities also reveal aspects of society. Patterns of living, modes of construction, and technologies are imprinted in buildings. However, the preservation or discontinuation of a particular building in the city, for example, is more than a natural character; it actually reveals society's values. Whether it highlights what a society considers valuable and chooses to preserve it or reveals what a society opposes or neglects.

As Solà-Morales reflects, “In reality, every intervention problem is always a problem of interpreting an existing architectural work because the possible forms of intervention that arise are always ways of interpreting the new discourse that the building can produce. An intervention is as much about trying to make the building say something again and to say it in a specific direction.” (I. De Solà-Morales, 2006, p.15)¹

In this regard, it is essential to be aware of and fully understand why we preserve and how we do it. Is preserving architectural heritage merely a matter of sustainability, or does it pose a more profound, symbolic question?

¹ Original excerpt: “En realidad, todo problema de intervención es siempre un problema de interpretación de una obra de arquitectura ya existente, porque las posibles formas de intervención que se plantean siempre son formas de interpretar el nuevo discurso que el edificio puede producir. Una intervención es tanto como intentar que el edificio vuelva a decir algo y lo diga en una determinada dirección.”

As Lynch argues: “An important factor in transmitting intelligence of change is a knowledge of how the inhabitants of an area image the past, present, and future. Certainly, no environmental alteration should be planned without understanding these common images of time and without considering how alterations will support or enrich them.” (Lynch, 1976, p. 228). This understanding of the past, as Kevin Lynch suggests, is not just a matter of historical accuracy but a key to imagining the future. It provides vital material that ensures that urban and architectural planning is rooted in a thoughtful understanding of a shared history.

In the case of Tallinn, reflecting on the layers of time imprinted in the city is almost unavoidable. As Klaske Havik describes, “Tallinn is a city in which all different layers of history seem to be glued on top of each other—layers so attached that you can touch medieval times, the era of independence in the 1920s, Soviet features and effects of a market economy all at once.” (Havik, 2000, p.25)

However, it is essential to think more deeply about the issue of time rather than just preserving it without any justification. The preservation is not meant to romanticize the past but to ensure a thoughtful and sustainable future. This preservation is a strategic and thoughtful process aimed at maintaining the integrity and character of cities. Thus, it is necessary to think of urban planning that acknowledges the past, responds to current needs, and is flexible enough to adapt to future scenarios.

This research unavoidably deals with preservation in architecture. The neighborhood of Kopli was built from 1913 to 1916, intended to house the workers of the Russo-

Baltic Shipyard. Conceived by architect Aleksandr Dmitrijev, it comprised 66 buildings, offering around 1.200 apartments, alongside essential community facilities such as a hospital, sauna, retail stores, a post office, cinema, community center, church, and a bakery. By 1915, the shipyard employed around 7.500 individuals, with an estimated 6.000 residing within Kopli.

The neighborhood experienced a gradual decline, beginning with the Second World War and subsequent Soviet occupation by a lack of investment. Contrary to the privatization trend following Estonia’s independence in 1991, Kopli Lines remained municipally owned, contributing to continued neglect due to the absence of state-funded maintenance. The turning point for the area came in 2018 with its acquisition by a new developer. Nowadays, Kopli Lines presents an interesting juxtaposition of new buildings alongside the remnants of decayed dwellings. The area’s redevelopment invites discussion on cultural heritage preservation and the dynamics of gentrification typically witnessed in such scenarios.

The decision to preserve existing buildings reflects a deliberate architectural position. Even if these buildings are not legally protected, they are integral components of the built environment. This perspective treats preexisting structures as assets to be engaged with rather than as a “*tabula rasa*.” By understanding and addressing the current states of abandonment (bakery), disuse (sauna), and obliteration (cinema), this approach advocates for reestablishing these spaces into public and collective places.

² Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Nuanced. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved May 5, 2024, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nuanced>

Conclusion

In conclusion, and as a means of reflecting on the project's outcomes, the exercise of characterizing the project proved highly significant. Indeed, several adjectives could describe the project itself and my perspective and positioning as an architect. Among these, words like tangible, palpable, subtle, nuanced, modest, and mundane come to mind. However, to reflect on a broader scale—beyond just this graduation project—"nuanced" is the most fitting descriptor for my approach.

By definition, "nuanced" refers to having subtle, often appealingly complex qualities, aspects, or distinctions, whether in character or tone.² This characteristic suggests a level of sophistication in recognizing and addressing the complexities inherent in various situations.

Nuances are evident in multiple aspects of this specific project: the organization of the program, the development of details, the selection of materials, and the treatment of the preexisting structures. All these considerations acknowledge that architecture, by its very essence, is a layered and multifaceted discipline.

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