

Work in Progress

The streets and stones of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, tell a story of changing regimes, a tale of occupations and liberations, with them changing ideological beliefs. During my fairly short visit to do the research on site, I noticed the imprint this left on the urban environment and the people. How, after the liberation of the authoritarian communist USSR and the transition to neoliberal capitalism, cars and consumerism gained a symbolic meaning of freedom and thereby earned a prominent place in the city with its motorways, vast parking and gigantic malls. At the same time acquiring significance in people's personal lives, it is not for nothing that some of the most modest apartments have the shiniest cars in front, or that the country got qualified as Europe's most "entrepreneurial hotspots" in a report by the world economic forum¹. How societal position towards housing shifted after mass privatisation, bringing positive- as well as negative implications. For instance, the problem surrounding the responsibility for the upkeep of apartment blocks that arose. Or the glossy billboards showing slick renders of apartments, often aimed at the middle- or higher-income groups, taking over prominent spaces within the city and at its coastline.

Within the relatively young democracy of Estonia, neoliberal capitalism with its open market economy is often associated with this newly found freedom. Even though this has brought prosperity to the country and the people, this radical conversion exposes some of its shortcomings and weaknesses as well. Complications that also occur in different parts of the world but might appear closer to the surface here as it hasn't yet been polished away and masked over time.

A sense of reflexive impotence, as Mark Fisher puts it, falls over society as a heavy blanket, immobilising and inducing hedonistic apathy among the youth. For the long term is cancelled by a precarious existence in the flexible post-Fordist work environment and conformity of the known is favoured over the uncertainty of a courageous leap into the undiscovered. Making it virtually impossible to imagine, let alone actualize, an alternative.²

In a more elaborate text I've written about this, I discuss the mutually influencing relationship between agency and structure and thereby recognise the influence that (designed) space within a broader structure of society could have on people's agency. Besides this I point to the supportive quality with which the physical environment can assist in the further fulfilment of human potential and life, facilitating experiment, iteration and the alternative. Tapping into people's and their communities' problem-solving potential and inventiveness. Empowering people to play a proactive role in reshaping their physical environment that could lead to iterative-, fluid- and resilient buildings. A living environment that can evolve and sustainably accommodate the future needs and desires of people and their communities.

Location

The Porto Franco development, an unsuccessful construction project of a mall and office spaces at the Admiralty Basin over which a government fell and the prime minister had to step down after a corruption scandal. Resulting in a years-long standstill of the construction, a still and open structure of several thousands of square meters.

¹ World Economic Forum. "Europe's Most Entrepreneurial Country? Estonia (and Germany Doesn't Make the Top 10)," February 6, 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/europes-most-entrepreneurial-country/>.

² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (John Hunt Publishing, 2022).

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Location

Before we visited Tallinn, I planned on doing my graduation project on the island of Naissaar, just off the coast of the city. The formerly militarised island with forts, cannon batteries, sea mines and a history of insurrection would turn out to be unreachable due to unruly seas. This made for a painful realisation that I would have to reevaluate the case I looked so much forward to. Finally, after long deliberation and evaluation of multiple different sites, shifted my project to the mainland, towards this new case of the unfinished Porto Franco project.

While designing a way to redevelop and fill in the unused Porto Franco structure in a bottom-up fashion to facilitate people and communities of more agency, different leading themes came to the fore that dictated the design of the building and its components. Yet this is often not found as a one-to-one relationship and different aspects of the design regularly overlap and respond to multiple of these leading themes. A case that would turn out to be more than capable of keeping me engaged over the year, though swapping the case did feel like a setback at the start of the year.

Responsibility as a Designer

One of the earlier things that I encountered and continuously came up during my research and design was the question of responsibility as a designer. When designing to provide people with more agency it is a fine line to walk between a finished design (dictating people's interaction with it) and leaving things open for people to fill in themselves. After reflecting on my responsibilities as an “expert” designer I realised that there is a value in a specialist quality that I can bring to the design that might not be as accessible to someone who is not trained as an architect. At the same time, it would be beneficial to leave the creation of other parts of the building to be done over time by the community.

For this, I looked at shearing layers of Brands³, where the most permanent layers of “site” and “structure” are already present on the location. Next to that, I realised the people and community are more than capable and possibly even better experts at determining the most fluid layers of a building being “space plan” and “stuff” over time. That left the more semi-permanent, still specialist and most communal layers of “skin” and “services” to my responsibility as a designer. To enable this adaptability a flexible and accessible building system should be designed which would be the foundation for the changing activity within the building. Especially within a colder climate like that of Estonia, it is necessary to properly design these components to create a livable interior environment, however setting these up in a way to accommodate the flexible system to allow for personal expression, creativity and iteration that could happen within.

Skin

To deal with this climate a greenhouse structure is placed around most of the building, as a second skin protecting the interior from the elements like rain and wind. Insulating the building more while leaving transparency for the interior facade to be more expressively and constructed by the people themselves. Wrapping the whole as a coherent facade prevents a chaotic appearance to the city. At the double plinth, the facade would get a more permanent brick infill based on modules to answer to the interior program and allow for varying rhythm within the facade. At the same time, the repetition of gates at the ground level creates coherence and enough possibility to adapt different entrances as the interior program changes over time.

³ Brand, Stewart. How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built. Penguin, 1995.

Service

Taking my responsibility for facilitating the services within the building interior elevated streets are created under which services like sewage, heat and electricity can be found. At the cohousing block incisions are made into the existing structure to allow light to enter into these interior parts of the building. Next to that, I designed a mobile facility block around which the private household can happen. This contains the toilet, bathroom and kitchen and is plugged into the sewage underneath the interior street. Applying a Fermacell system makes for an easy and adaptable provision of underfloor heating. Besides the more technical services, communal services are also adopted by the design like common spaces, kindergarten, wood workshop, greenery and a range of (semi-) different public functions.

Spaceplan

The infill of the building will be done by a flexible building system. By deciding on timber as the material it is accessible to work with, lightweight, available within the Estonian context, upscalable and locally producible in combination with a wood workshop in the plinth. By working with demountable panels within a bigger grid of 290cmx300cm (based on the existing structure) people can adjust their space plan over time. Designed in such a manner that the building can be gradually filled in and new modules can be linked to the ones that are already there. Making beams, columns and walls accessible from all directions. Applying galvanised steel height adjustable post bases makes for easy levelling and connecting to the existing structure. Combining this with steel dovetail connectors for the beams the system is relatively accessible and straightforward for untrained people to start constructing. All flooring is elevated (made possible by a min. ceiling height of 364cm) so the service cables and piping can be flexibly fitted underneath and extra room for storage is created. Cellulose panels and cavity walls insulate-, make for separated fire compartments and soundproof the appartements.

These design choices allow for a flexible infill of the building and an iterative living environment, empowering people to take agency through shaping their environment and thereby their lives over time while meeting and preserving the basic needs and well-functioning of the building.

Empowering

One of the most important themes within the project is agency and the question of how to empower people to have this agency in their lives and physical environment. For this, I approach it firstly in a more physical fashion by designing a structure and system that shelters and facilitates the services while at the same time being flexible enough to be adapted, appropriated and improved over time by the people who live it. I do this following the guidelines as I describe hereabove.

Next to this, the economic side of the story comes into play. Where the creation of such a structure is made feasible by allowing for incremental development in combination with creating space for economic activity in the productive plinth. This renders the need for a big initial capital obsolete as capital is generated over time in an accelerating way after which it can be invested back into the further construction of the building and its users.

Including economic productivity within the design also enables its users to generate certain financial stability, breaking with a precarious existence that is generated by an unreliable work-environment as described in the introduction. In combination with social stability by designing for and with communities in mind, people will experience more (social) safety and,

ultimately, room for experimentation and pursuit of their potential and ambitions (may it be individually- or communally expressed).

At the communal level, the organisation of people into communities and cooperatives empowers them on a broader societal scale. Giving them more social, political and economic power. Next to this care for each other and sharing facilities, costs and tasks could relieve some of the workload of managing a private household. Freeing up time and space for other things in life.

Connecting

Another theme that shows up at different places throughout the design is the connecting element of it. Here too in the literal sense where the emphasis is put on an accessible and workable connection within the timber system. But also revealing at a social level with the cohousing communities and the common spaces in the design connecting people.

Connecting the people of Tallinn to the sea again. By establishing a mixed-use living environment with public facilities at the coastline that has been militarized and inaccessible to the public during the USSR occupation. After much of the newly freed up coastline got developed into private apartments.

Lastly connecting the city of Tallinn to the harbour again, the port to overseas. Creating an attractive mixed-use environment here that draws people in to live, work or spend their pastime next to the harbour where the ferries arrive. This could draw more tourism and even migratory workers and creatives to the city.

Although I have spoken to people about what this public space could or should look like I unfortunately haven't gotten to a much more elaborate design of these, preferably indoors and non-commercial, public spaces. This is something that would get more of my attention in the further development of this project.

Topic, Track and Programme

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

Designing for agency and finding ways to fill in the unfinished Porto Franco structure with a flexible system results in a different approach to architecture that is more organic and ever-evolving by it being lived by its occupants. It expands the scope of what architecture could be by fulfilling needs within different facets of life other than only the physical. Acknowledging the immaterial implications that the act of shaping space can have. Approaching architecture not only as a mere aesthetic or pure functional machine but as a mechanism that influences a broader immaterial social sphere and impacts people's lives and consciousness on a deeper level.

The project relates to the graduation studio "A Matter of Scale" of Methods of Analysis and Imagination in the sense that it performs on a multitude of scales and that the design choices have always been made with the implications they have on different scales in mind. Take for example the way the detail of the connections in the flexible system influenced the workability and accessibility at the same time while dictating the connection of different parts within the

overall spaceplan of the building, thereby even the socio-economical structures by allowing for different programmatic and local production, again linking back to the lives and awareness of the individuals and communities. The design interventions perform and interact on different scales and within different themes and make the design into a coherent and tight-knit whole.

Next to this, the studio proposed the case of the formerly militarised- and inaccessible coast of Tallinn to delve further into. Although it might have been less intentional at first, the location creates an opportunity to reconnect the city to the Baltic Sea by creating an attractive living environment with public facilities as envisioned by this project, relating to the initial brief of the graduation studio.

Although it has been a fruitful project in the sense that I trained myself more to design and think on many scales at the same time, this could also make the process a bit messy. If an earlier design choice would turn out to not correspond with a different component on another scale the whole project would have to be adjusted as the parts are all very much interconnected. Due to the scale of the project small adjustments would therefore oftentimes take a considerable time. I am convinced that the flexible timber building system is developed to the mature point where it could be fitted into the whole of the structure, and even to similar unfinished structures elsewhere in the world with just minor adaptations. Yet due to the time it took me to get the system to this point, the implications on the larger urban and social scale that I was working towards and have in mind haven't been elaborated on and represented to the quality and quantity that I would have liked them to be.

Research and Design

How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

The research and design are two sides of the same coin more than separate parallel processes. By doing design research I applied theory from studying texts or principles from relevant case studies into the design. After this, I would evaluate the implications it had on the physical whole as well as on the way the design would function. The decision to either apply, adapt or leave out aspects of the design always created the need for further research to continue on a path or look further for alternatives.

About halfway through my graduation the theory and its implications on the design as well as implications the design had on the direction of the research made for a complex network. Especially because I wanted to position my project within this more complex network of immaterial social and economic actors I found myself entangled and lost track of direction.

When this happened, my mentors recommended me to start writing a text in which I elaborated on the more immaterial aspects and their implications. This helped me to get those to a more concrete level where it felt less like it was ever floating in between the lines of the design and allowed me to reflect on them in the following design choices I made. Next to this, it made it easier to convey these theories to my mentors and evaluate their relevance to the project. Ensuring that the project didn't evolve into a disjointed accumulation of material translations of various theories, bringing it back to core values from which a coherent project is developed.

Approach and Methodology

How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

By doing design research I continuously found myself reflecting and being critical of the choices I made. I kept an enduring curiosity and drive to gain a deeper understanding of the subjects the project was dealing with. This made for a cyclic- and iterative design process. By constantly basing my further development on new input and reflection the project became more and more elaborated and better advised.

Reflecting on this way of designing I think that sometimes I have taken the input- and looked for the implications on too broad of a scale which made it at times hard to maintain focus. Possibly it would have been beneficial to the project to settle with certain conclusions a bit sooner instead of looking for some sort of perfect design solution.

Even though the eagerness to find better solutions, explanations and a deeper understanding of the matter might sometimes have held a further quantitative elaboration of the project, this has also benefitted the overall argumentation and quality of the final design, making for a more elaborate knowledge and consideration on the subjects.

Reflecting back on the methodology as proposed in the graduation plan I found that I have well followed the different methods. Only leaving the Interviewing of people a bit to the side with only two interviews. Due to the limitations in time, I have to find peace with some of the gaps that will occur when taking on a project of this scale.

In the design methodology, I took a less conventional approach, which I myself was also not to familiar with. Starting at the very detail of the building system and scaling up towards the bigger picture. This was necessary as this is very much the design of a strategy to fill this structure in from the bottom up, therefore this system is the very foundation in which all the rest within the building could be realised. Developing the connections, parts and grid took a lot of energy and time and here it is that the mentors have helped me not to lose sight of the bigger picture. They pointed out that the common- and public spaces lacked some attention at a certain point after which I took a step back from that system and put my attention to developing these further. Besides this, my mentors have very much supported and accompanied me in the design research by helping to keep on track and encouraging me to look further and deeper for the design challenges I encountered, making sure that the principles and guidelines that I distilled and finally applied in my design are well supported and thought out.

Academic and Societal Value

How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

In a broader academic and societal sense this graduation project critically interrogates current global trends by exploring and proposing a constructive alternative. Supported with academic argumentation that relates a set of different theories to each other and attempts to translate them into a physical and realistic proposition. It interrogates a widespread philosophy and economic model that has been generally accepted for decades, on its mechanisms and the implications it has on our lives.

By constructing this alternative narrative (which is by no means posed as a holy grail solution to all of our problems) about what this corrupted concrete structure at the shores of Tallinn could be, now a symbolic embodiment for the development of the built environment for profit. This exploration of how to develop this into a different living environment that provides agency instead of taking it away from people, developed bottom-up by the people and their communities.

Ultimately, hopefully, this proposition would engage and activate people to rethink the conventional mechanisms in which we compose our environments and open up space to dream up alternatives to the way we participate, produce, and share our living environments. Space that we so urgently need at a time when more and more of the shortcomings of our current way of doing become apparent.

I developed the tendency, as I have already mentioned above, to sometimes take the problematisation and implications of my design on too broad of a scale. Here the mentors proved to be very valuable and helped me to trim loose threads and be critical of what this broad view was worth (or not), this helped to establish a better core and foundation for the final project. This drive to understand this broader social sphere in relation to architecture is something that I hope to maintain over the upcoming years, still, I learned this year, from my own reflection and through dialogue with my mentors that I should be too impatient. Understanding this and establishing change on a broader scale needs time and for that, I should first establish myself as a good architect with proper design skills before this other value can be added.

Ook hier heeft begeleiding mij geholpen vaak de losse draden te knippen en het ontwerp terug te brengen naar de kern door kritisch te zijn op de uitwaaiering die vaak plaats vond.

Transferability

How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

While locally applied, many of the different principles and guidelines proposed by this project can be taken, adapted and applied by other projects and designers. It is a collection as well as an iteration of a broad range of design interventions (based on case studies) that ultimately allow for more agency and a different approach to how we live together. As described earlier the timber system itself is very well adaptable to fill in similar structures. The global philosophy to which this project reacts is widespread and many more of these unfinished structures can be found and used to explore other ways of shaping our living environment in a more organic-, iterative- and resilient manner.

Architecture as a tool

For this last part, I briefly would like to reflect on the scope and the intention of my project. More than often architecture is put forward as some kind of absolute all-encompassing solution, or “silver bullet theory” as one of the co-teachers in my studio put it, the intention of this project was never to pose this as some sort of absolute solution. Besides that it is very unlikely that such a thing exists as the one solution to the proposed problems, this project is a mere attempt to unravel and expose a part of the complex network of actors and power relations that compose our environment. Positioning myself and the architecture I design within this network and reflect on how it influences and what implications this could have on how that network is structured and the power relations within. Underscoring existing relations within the network and elaboration on ways that people can participate in the creation of space. It is by acknowledging the temporality of space that animates space. By creating architecture that answers to the living character of space it is that architecture could become a tool. A tool to mediate between the individual and the social sphere, an instrument to empower people to intervene and proactively steer in their lives. It is through this interaction, through this being lived that architecture becomes more than just an empty shell. Here it is that architecture and the architect can assist in enriching people's lives, supporting, bringing perspective and opening up space to dream.

Some people might say that in the way that I composed this project, I too enforce or impose a way of life onto the people that would live it. Undoubtedly with intervening in space, there will always be consequences to the bigger whole. Yet this intervention is aimed to tread the line on how to do this in the least rigid way while still maintaining a livable- and well-functioning whole. It is a mechanism to bend and alter to your own liking in dialogue with the community, it is meant as a more democratic way of establishing one's environment. This project should be a platform that opens up chances to expand the scope of one's living environment. There might be more of an emphasis on communal aspects within the design than your average terraced house, but that is a design choice I have made based on the opportunities I see in that organisation of communities. It would be uncertain if people would live that close together and certainly wouldn't have to continuously sit on each other's lap (that is the reason that I made sure the private household would be perfectly functional and include all basic facilities). However, it is easier to not use common facilities that actually are there than to try and use facilities that aren't. With the flexible system, this could be very well adapted by the inhabitants over time if that is desired. One of the major benefits and opportunities of using the Porto Franco structure is that for once it isn't about designing the most efficient building in terms of square meters. As for now, it is nothing but an empty hull that could become all of this... And more!