

Kesklinn Community Centre

Reimagining Soviet-Era Heritage through the Lenses of Memory and Perception

P4 Reflection

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2023/24 Q4

MSc 3/4 Graduation Studio: A Matter of Scale

Chair of Methods of Analysis & Imagination

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May 2024

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The regime of the Soviet Union undeniably left a mark on the life, culture, and architecture of its former member countries. Estonia, having been under Soviet occupation between 1940-1941 and 1944-1991, bears witness to this era through the buildings originating from that time. The Soviet period remains ingrained in the collective memory of the nation, echoed through its architectural remnants which stand as enduring symbols of an ideology now recognized as a repressive past. Consequently, buildings stemming from this era often spark controversy in the public opinion and lack heritage protection.

While it may be inevitable to associate Soviet heritage with the trauma and memories of oppression, dismissing buildings solely on their period of origin poses the risk of neglecting their socio-cultural significance and unique architectural qualities. Instead, by meticulously evaluating the qualities of a building, appropriate solutions can be found for its preservation and adaptation to a new, contemporary situation.

My graduation project places memory at its core and explores the nuanced relationship between memories, perception and architecture stemming from the Soviet ideology.

The site chosen for my graduation project is the former foreign currency shop, previously called "Turist" that aimed at the tourists who were expected to visit Tallinn during the 1980 Summer Olympic Games. While stemming from a later period of the Soviet regime, when architecture lacked communist ornamentation, the building can be understood as an ideological symbol itself. Exclusively aimed at people who possessed foreign currency, it had little significance for the regular Estonian citizens, serving as a reminder of the inequalities perpetuated by the Soviet authority. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the plot has been privatized and throughout the years the monumental solitary building has temporarily housed a bank, a store and following that a succession of night clubs. Neither of these functions prompted a rigorous change in the building's facades, nor did they encourage engagement with the fragmented surrounding urban area.

After years of trials with the plot owner, the government has failed to secure a heritage protection of the building. An architectural competition has been organized for the development of the area and the plan is to demolish the Turist shop and to replace it with a high-rise. The architecture of the Turist shop is a unique example not only in Estonia but also in the wider European context. Therefore, demolishing it would be a great loss to architectural heritage. Furthermore, introducing a high-rise in the urban block will intensify Tallinn's existing issue of constructing without regard for urban context and human scale.

With my project I propose an alternative that preserves and transforms the Turist shop, while honouring particularities of the past, present and future. Memories and perception in architecture serve as a foundation for reimagining the space and for guiding my design proposal. The Turist shop, formerly exclusive to foreign visitors and those with the privilege of possessing foreign currency, will be transformed into an inviting community centre accessible to all. The lack of windows, originally intended to prevent passers-by from seeing inside the shop is seen as an architectural feature that defines the character of the building. The deliberate choice to repurpose it into a library and an art gallery takes into account its enclosed design and distinctive character. The proposed extension serves as a hub for various public functions, such as an auditorium, a cinema, working and studying spaces, workshop areas and sports facilities, and stands out as a contemporary manifestation of the present. The form, scale, proportions, materialization and detailing of the new extension contrast that of the communist monument, maintaining a balance that avoids overshadowing it. This is

achieved through a composition characterized by rhythm, simplicity and a strategic interplay between closeness and openness. An atrium between the two buildings is the heart of the project, where the past and the present exist together.

By transforming the former Turist shop into a community centre, my project seeks to open up the once closed Soviet building by surrounding it with a new layer that fosters community building and redefines the urban setting. The courtyard of the urban block, once an indistinct space dominated by parked cars and fences, is envisioned as a green heart that seamlessly connects the neighbouring residential and office buildings with the new community centre.

REFLECTION

While decision-making has never been my strong side, picking the Methods of Analysis and Imagination graduation studio felt like a straightforward and instinctive choice. It was important for me to select a studio that would allow me to explore deeper my own identity as a designer. I aimed to undertake a project that resonated with me personally. Originating from Bulgaria, which was a former satellite state of the Soviet Union, my curiosity for the subject of my project has been sparked already before the beginning of the graduation studio. Listening to the memories and stories of my parents and grandparents from the communist era and contemplating how different their life must have been compared to mine, has always intrigued me. Throughout my studies, I increasingly found myself interested in architecture shaped by ideologies, alongside a newfound curiosity in the subject of perception and human experience of architecture.

Our excursion to Tallinn, as part of the course, marked my first encounter with the remains of a Soviet past in a different country and re-confirmed my fascination with the subject. While there were a lot of buildings stemming from the Soviet period in Estonia which presented opportunities for re-purposing, it was the Turist shop that stood out the most to me. The monumental, distinctive shape of the building, coupled with its absence of windows and set against a backdrop of residential, office, and contemporary high-rise buildings, instantly sparked my interest. I found out that the building used to function as a foreign currency shop during the Soviet times. Interestingly, my childhood home was also located near a similar establishment where only those with foreign currency could shop during the communist regime. Having heard stories from my parents about that particular store, I became interested in the memories that the Turist shop carries. That was the starting point, which eventually became the core subject of my research.

Interviewing people provided me with insights into how Estonians perceived and experienced the Turist shop, as well as the memories that the building evokes for them. All the different stories shared one thing in common and that was how people felt excluded from the Turist store. Despite the diversity of stories shared, a common thread emerged: a sense of exclusion. Recognizing the architectural potential of the site, my aim became to reimagine it in a manner that both respects these memories and shifts people's perception of the place by transforming it into an inviting public environment. Through conversations with the students we met in Estonia I learned about the lack of non-commercial public spaces in Tallinn and after visiting the Oodi Library in Helsinki, designing a multi-functional community centre and library seemed the most appropriate function.

My initial design approach was very different from my final proposal. As this is the first heritage preservation project I have worked on, I was extremely cautious with the alterations I would make to the building, as well as with the architecture that I add. Initially I envisioned the contemporary extension harmonizing with the former Turist shop and highlighting its prominence. However, after

feedback from P2, my tutors encouraged me to be more daring and reminded me that design possibilities are limitless. It took me some time to realise that there is not a single correct answer. Their guidance led me to explore a different direction, one that respects the history of the former Tourist shop while allowing the contemporary addition to contrast with its architecture. I also realised that this contrast did not have to overshadow the old building but that they could both exist together, the past and the present, side by side. This realisation also informed the form, spatial organisation, and material choices in my project. Furthermore, the design process was enriched by continuous research into precedents, shaping the course of my design decisions. Additionally, model-making, sketching, computer modelling and learning from trial and error played integral roles in the development of my project.

In summary, this project has been both intense and profoundly enriching. It has provided me with the opportunity to deepen my knowledge and refine my skills as an architect. Moreover, it enabled me to bridge and deepen various interests, including architecture shaped by ideologies, human perception, and memories in architecture. I hope that my graduation project presents a sound example of how to address building preservation and transformation from the Soviet period and inspires further projects in the field of architecture.