

Reimagining Kopli

a multifaceted strategy to urban revitalization in Tallinn

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Methods of Analysis and Imagination

A Matter of Scale

AR3A010 Research Plan

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Introduction

The analogy of cities as palimpsests is certainly no novelty in urban theory. In fact, the image of a “writing material used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased”¹ illustrates efficiently the way cities evolve over time. In this perspective, Tallinn stands out as a collage of memories. Its cityscape reveals the intricate layering of history, ranging from medieval times to current days, portrayed particularly thorough architectural buildings.

The end of the Soviet Era, especially, plays a relevant shift on Tallinn’s urban fabric. The progressive aperture towards the “Western world” has attracted external investments and has led to the internationalization of the city.

As a result, if on one hand the city stands, nowadays, as a fertile soil for innovation, on the other, the progressive internationalization puts at risk the authenticity of habits, traditions and rituals. If we consider that cultures as well as cities are palimpsests, the notion of authenticity is tensioned. After all, cultures are not static, they are constantly changing and evolving. However, the progressive vanishment of authentic rituals and traditions can also be considered harmful for society since it diminishes heterogeneity through the well known processes of globalization and internationalization.

¹Palimpsest,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed [25/10/2023], <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/palimpsest>

¹ *Tallinn: a collage city,*
Author's drawing.



As a way of navigating these complex realities, the ethnographical approach demonstrates to be an adequate option. Pursuing a detailed observation and interpretation of the environment, fostering a nuanced understanding of reality is the key element for this study. The level of refinement provided by ethnographical research also puts in the spotlight the question of scale, with special interest on the human scale.

Besides that, this research aims to stress the notion of architectural scale by proposing small but accurate interventions in the city. By doing so, the effectiveness of small-scale architecture goes against the idea that monumental or large-scale architectures are the sole catalysts for impactful urban transformation. Small-scale interventions scattered throughout the city can be equally, if not more, significant.

Problem Statement

This research departs from the images of Tallinn as an ‘unfinished city’, a ‘patchwork city’, or even a ‘schizophrenic city’. Despite their diversity, these terms converge at a common point linked to Tallinn’s multifaceted history. As Klaske Havik aptly defines, “Estonian history is built up of a series of periods characterized by extreme political situations.”²

This series of radical political transformations has given birth to what can be termed a ‘collage city’, an urban landscape where disparate historical periods coexist. Here, the medieval scenario of the city center stands in stark contrast to the contemporary glass façades of modern high-rises of the commercial areas.

As stated by Kurik, “A dramatic change from one regime to another (and in terms of space, from one form of land ownership to the polar opposite) creates an opportunity to clearly identify mechanisms of urban change and uncover how property and architecture are always strongly embedded in politics.”³

Focusing on residential neighborhoods, this study examines two dominant urban models: the Soviet-era blocks in districts like Lasnamäe, Mustakivi, Mustamäe, and Oismäe, and on the other hand, neighborhoods such as Pelgulinn, Mustjõe, and Kakumäe, which echo the American suburban typology.

Both models, despite their distinct organizational forms, adhere to the same principle of creating residential clusters, surrounded by large commercial

²Havik, K. (2000). Tallinn: a movie scene. *MAJA*, 2/3(26). p.25

³Kurik, K. L. (2021). *The Value of Uncertainty. Temporality, Indeterminacy and the Post-Socialist Condition in Tallinn, Estonia. Three case studies* [PhD Dissertation]. Manchester University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. p.30

² Bekker Port masterplan, KTA.
<https://www.kta.ee/bekker-port-masterplan>



zones like shopping malls. This design not only shapes the urban fabric but fosters a car-centric city. Jane Jacobs, in her analogy of “the ballet of Hudson Street,”⁴ highlights the importance of mixed-use typologies for a city’s security and maintenance.

In parallel to that, since Estonia’s independence in 1991, Tallinn has undergone considerable urban transformation, including the revitalization of areas like Kalamaja and Noblessener. Plans for districts like Kopli and Paljassaare are mostly still in the design phase, primarily addressing quantitative and qualitative matters, yet often overlooking the finer nuances of everyday life. The risk in these plans is that they may replicate the patterns of Soviet-era or American suburb-style neighborhoods, characterized by residential clusters surrounded by commercial giants.

This study aims to refine these masterplans, considering the intricate nuances across various scales - from urban to human, down to detailed construction. The goal is not to alter the proposed housing but to enrich these plans, considering every scale of living. The intended result is a final design comprising various small-scale interventions, collectively addressing the concerns for the quality of Tallinn’s urban future.

⁴ Jacobs, J. (1992). The death and life of great American cities. Vintage. p.153

Conceptual Framework

The core framework for this research is anchored in a range of methodologies and theories that place everyday life at the forefront of understanding and interrogating specific issues. This study delves into various disciplinary perspectives, encompassing philosophical, anthropological, artistic, and architectural viewpoints, each contributing unique insights into the fabric of daily existence. Through this multidisciplinary lens, the research aims to offer a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the chosen subject matter.

To start with, the works of Vivian Maier, Michael Wolf, and Martin Parr, who, in disparate contexts, demonstrate how photography can capture a certain context through images of the ordinary. These photographs portray seemingly mundane moments, yet they unveil profound insights into specific eras, human behavior, and, on a broader scale, societies. More than that, each of those pictures serves as a catalyst for inexhaustible themes and interpretations.

Centuries earlier, in the 17th century, Johannes Vermeer's art consistently excelled in portraying everyday life. His paintings, typically imbued with a tranquil ambiance, depict ordinary scenes—a woman pouring milk, another reading a letter. "The Little Street" is a particularly exquisite example of how the ordinary is of value. In this painting, Vermeer portrays a common street in the city of Delft, with ordinary people going about their daily routines. It

³Maier, V. Streets 2. 1954.
<https://www.vivianmaier.com/gallery/street-2/#slide-38mackenzie.%2Fbitstream%2Fhandle%2F10899%2F26049%2FLiana%2520Paula%2520Perez%2520de%2520Oliveira4>.



presents a rich canvas for interpretation and sparks the imagination with potential narratives.

In the realm of literature, Georges Perec's work, especially "Life: A User's Manual," reveals his fascination with the ordinary. Through intricate and detailed stories, Perec narrates the lives of the inhabitants of a Parisian apartment block. Just as in "Rear window" by Alfred Hitchcock, the observation of the everyday activities of the neighbors unfolds into subjects of fascination and further development.

In this sense, the observations of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau on everyday life, despite their contrasting approaches and theoretical foundations, both purpose profound problematization into how daily practices shape spaces. While Lefebvre brings his Marxist input to the equation, de Certeau adopts a lyrical and philosophical approach to the subject.

More recently, Esra Akcan's work in "Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship, and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg by IBA-1984/87" argues for a methodology that presents "individual noncitizens voices as an oral historian who does not have claims to representability, but may rely on a single witness, and as a storyteller who alternates between the role of author and resident and who acknowledges that the fabric of everyday life unfolding in an individual's experience of a space is also part of the history of that space."⁵ By arguing so, she highlights an ethical concern

⁵ Akcan, E. (2018). Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship, and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg by IBA-1984/87. Birkhäuser. p.37

⁴ Gicovati, S. Flor deMandacaru ILBPMB Archives. <https://dspace.mackenzie.br/bitstream/handle/10899/26049/Liana%20Paula%20Perez%20de%20Oliveira4>.

⁵ <https://www.agro20.com.br/mandacaru/>

Railing detail on Lina Bo Bardi's design on SESC Pompeia influenced by a typical Brazilian vegetation: Mandacaru.



regarding the consideration of oral narratives as a means to share stories that might otherwise remain unheard.

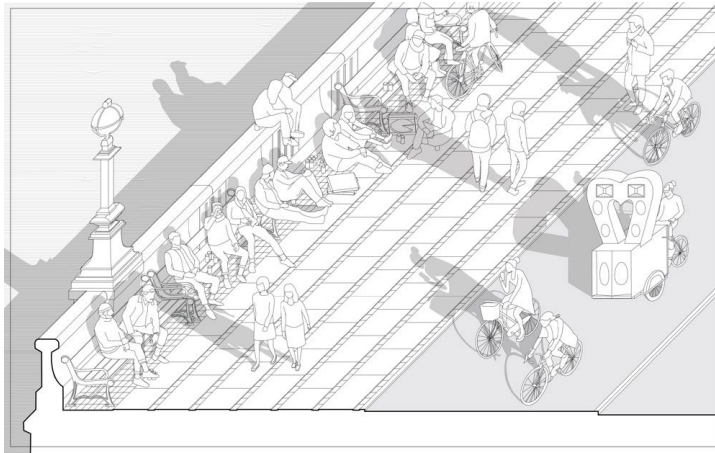
All of this underscores the extensive exploration of the overarching theme of everyday life across various fields of knowledge. This prompts the question of why this topic is still relevant, and especially why it matters in the realm of architecture.

To answer these questions, it is important to look into the work of architects who have embraced this humanistic approach. Lina Bo Bardi, Atelier Bow-Wow, Wajiro Kon, and Rural Studio, among others, have been acknowledged for their architectural practices were informed by a deep understanding of human experiences. By analyzing not only their architectural designs but also their written works, it becomes evident how the observation of human existence significantly influences the design process and is translated into tangible architectural elements.

In summary, the theoretical foundation of this research hinges upon the investigation of everyday life observations as a means to a rooted source of knowledge. . The potential for multifaceted inquiries stemming from this subject matter is boundless. Consequently, the theoretical framework serves as a pivotal platform for formulating essential questions and concerns. Nevertheless, it is equally important to highlight the significance of empirical

⁶ Atelier Bow Wow. Commonalities. <https://www.archined.nl/2016/02/commonalities-in-architecture/>

⁷Wajiro, K. Modernology <https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/academicprogrammes/visittingschool/tokyo-ici-to-ridebr%2Fbitstream%2Fhandle%2F10899%2F26049%2FLiana%2520Paula%2520Perez%2520de%2520Oliveira4>.



validation through observational methodologies and the subsequent integration of their findings into architectural design. This practical dimension is essential for translating theoretical insights into tangible applications.



Research Questions and Methodology

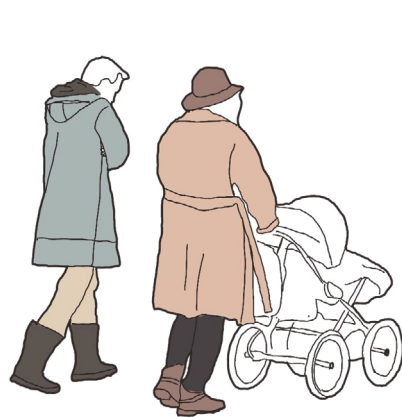
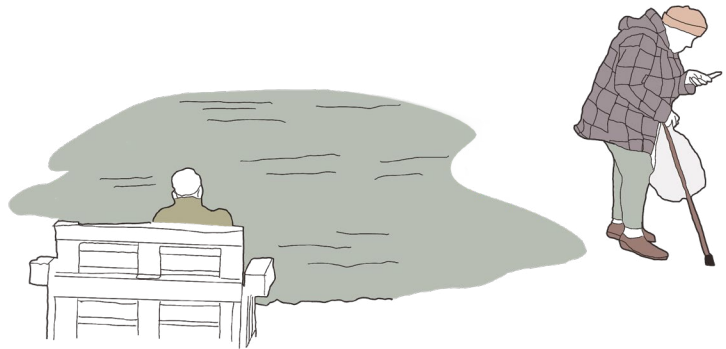
This research delves into a metalinguistic inquiry into the very methods employed in architectural research. It works as a means of reflecting on the architectural practices, on ethical matters and on the architect's position within society. In essence, the question posed is:

How does an ethnographic investigation and meticulous observation of everyday life in Tallinn (understanding the culture, habits, traditions, architectural patterns, and structures) inform and enhance architectural and design strategies attuned with human-scale interactions?

Besides that, this research also encompasses questions that are focused on the context of Tallinn.

These questions serve as both critiques of existing situations and explorations of future possibilities, which will fundamentally shape the architectural design process and decisions. One overarching question is: What is the significance of small-scale interventions within an urban context of Tallinn, and how do they differ from larger-scale endeavors?

⁸ Observations on the usage of public space in Tallinn. Author's drawings.



The following sub-questions are presented to aid in addressing the central question.

What deficiencies exist in the current design plans for Kopli and Paljasaare?

Methodology: Interviews with Current Inhabitants of Kopli Lines, Area Mapping, Analysis of the current plans for the area.

How can the incorporation of a human-scale perspective be integrated into the process of crafting master plans? What are the specific elements that bring master-plan to the human-scale level?

Methodology: Literature Review and Case Studies

How can human behaviors, traditions and culture be collected and analyzed? And how can they be translated into design?

Methodology: Ethnographical Observation (observation, drawings, field notes, photography, video recordings of public spaces and interactions)

Are there any endangered practices or traditions, and should they be revitalized? If so, how can this be achieved?

Methodology: Historical Analysis (review of historical documents, academic articles, architectural/urban plans, historical photos and cultural texts related to Tallinn)

Precedent studies

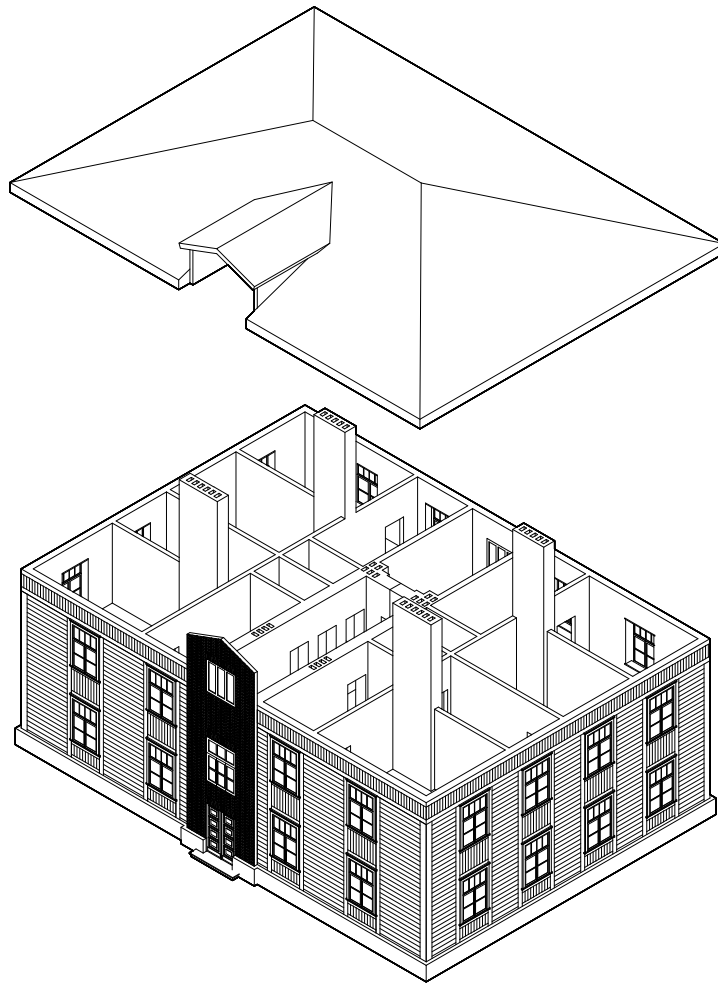
As part of the disciplinary analysis, the analysis of the project of the “Kopli Lines” was selected to support the general research.

Kopli Lines is a coastal neighborhood, built from 1913 to 1916, intended to house the workers of the Russo-Baltic Shipyard. Conceived by architect Aleksandr Dmitrjev, the area was comprised of 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 Lines.

This study delves into the housing typologies designed specifically for skilled laborers. These buildings were distinguished by a central stone staircase and timber framing. These 2-story wooden blocks featured 12 apartments each, with a standard size of roughly 35 square meters, including a bedroom and kitchen, and shared toilets.

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, a factor that contributed to continued neglect due to the absence of state-funded maintenance.

⁹ Kopli Lines Isometric.
Author's drawing.



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 transformative journey of Kopli Lines makes it a rich subject for research. Noteworthy aspects include the traditional timber housing representative of Estonian architecture, the socio-economic impacts post-Soviet era, and the complexities of the privatization processes. Moreover, the area's redevelopment invites discussion on cultural heritage preservation and the dynamics of gentrification typically witnessed in such scenarios.

Final Considerations

This research encompasses two distinct dimensions. First, there is the investigation and reflection on the matter of everyday life and all its theoretical ramifications. As a way of developing this dimension, the ethnographical method is explored. The primary objective of this initial theoretical reflection is to advocate for a more human-centered approach to architecture.

Secondly, a contextual analysis of Tallinn is presented. This analysis utilizes ethnographical methods with a particular focus on residential neighborhoods. The purpose of this segment is to critically assess the current urban structure, examine future plans, and scrutinize how these plans can be subject to questioning and enhancement.

Moving towards the project proposal phase, , the amalgamation of empirical research based on ethnographic methods and a theoretical reflection encompassing philosophical and practical inquiries will lay the groundwork for our design proposal. The intended “small interventions” be crafted in response to the questions and concerns that emerge during the analytical phase of this study.

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