



VR-Tour in Tallinn, October 2023. Picture taken by author

FORUM FOR THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

In October 2023, I had the opportunity to visit Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia. My fascination with the city came from my desire to explore the trajectory of a nation that relatively recently established its independence. Having gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonia achieved remarkable strides within three decades, establishing itself as a pioneering force in digital technology.

My project stems from an extensive body of research, prompted by Estonia's post-independence trajectory characterised by a shift towards digitalisation. This project aims to study the physical infrastructure of public services within the context of digitalisation. Situated on the periphery of Tallinn's historic city centre, the project strategically bridges the realms of governmental and municipal institutions. The plot underwent initial development but was left unfinished, resulting in a sense of discordance with its surroundings. Moreover, being situated on St. Pärnu Street, a big axis through the city, it's a common route for many residents who travel by foot, car, or public transport.

Proposal

The proposal, titled "Forum for the Built Environment," surged in response to the observed deficiency of physical spaces conducive to reflection, gatherings, and citizen participation in the city. Its primary aim is to function as a platform for democratic dialogue among Tallinn's citizens on matters of public interest within the domain of the built environment.

Consisting of four distinct buildings, each distinguished by unique architectural features, the project encapsulates the multifaceted essence of Tallinn. These architectural variances symbolise the diversity of perspectives and identities inherent within societal structures, embodying the principles of democracy. The primary objective of Forum for the Built Environment is to establish a neutral ground for open discourse while facilitating collaboration between the city planning office and citizens, ensuring continuous engagement and dialogue. Furthermore, the project is not only experienced within the buildings but also in its outside environment. The project functions as a pathway, crossing through a city block. People can wander off and walk past different architectures. In addition, the ruinous garden is positioned on the eastern side of the project, which offers a space of tranquillity for reflection.

Functionally, the four buildings serve specific programmatic purposes: a Forum space for exhibitions and discussions, an Office for the City Architect for input and opinion gathering, an Archive housing physical and digital materials for city history research, and a children's day-care facility to support parental engagement in civic activities. Each building is tailored to its intended use and scale.

- 1: The Forum structure has a large scale, designed for adaptability by its users. Distinguished by its contemporary design, its ground floor hosts an expansive exhibition area showcasing a comprehensive city model, serving as a focal point for visitors. The first floor includes a versatile discussion space with movable walls that can be adjusted to create various configurations, from auditorium-style settings to smaller rooms. Additionally, these walls double as information displays, enhancing functionality.
- 2: Similarly, the municipal space on the ground level provides amenities for citizen inquiries and complaints regarding building processes, fostering transparency and public engagement. The upper floors house the office of the City Architect, serving as the offices of the architects and urbanists who work for the municipality of Tallinn.
- 3: The Archival facility relates to an intimate scale. It has a familiar architectural structure (in contrast with the Forum building) consisting of individual usage. In addition, it features reading and study spaces on the lower levels, with archival materials stored in the basement and upper floors.
- 4: The children's day-care facility, designed on a residential and local scale, accommodates 10 to 15 children, enabling parents to participate in civic affairs without childcare impediments.

Furthermore, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the architectural intricacies of the project, the

buildings not only serve as experimental spaces in their social and spatial arrangements but also in their technical construction. For instance, the forum structure represents an innovative approach, constructed predominantly of steel and featuring a hanging structure supported by two concrete cores. This boldness is further accentuated by its façade composition, characterised by slender window elements and a frame, refining its volumetric configuration. Similarly, the archival building presents a seemingly simplistic and monolithic appearance from a distance. However, upon closer inspection, the façade reveals intricate details, with some columns serving as structural supports while others function as ventilation and rainwater ducts. These columns are not only functional but also relate to the recognisable architectural composition of a colonnade. Despite their contrasting purposes and scales, both the Forum building and the Archive engage in a dialogue, showcasing complexity and complementarity in their design.

Project reflection

Reflecting on my project, I position my graduation as the physical embodiment of my view of the architectural profession. I recognise the need for new typologies within the urban sphere that can effectively respond to rapid societal changes. It is essential that buildings evolve considering the technological and digital advancements in contemporary societies. Moreover, the project contemplates the role of an architect as a communicator and thinker who conceptualises architectural ideas and broadcasts them to society.

This attempt aspires to democratise architectural discourse, fostering transparency and embracing diverse perspectives within the built environment. The forum presents a new addition to the city while offering a recognisable programmatic identity. The acknowledgement of diverse viewpoints underlines the project's innovative typology, presenting a replicable model adaptable to various urban settings. However, the implementation of the Forum in different countries would result in an adaptation of its program, as it is essential to analyse the characteristics of each city.

Upon reflection, conducting my project in Tallinn has created a thematic outcome that I had not envisioned had I chosen a different setting. This effort has provided valuable insights into the potential future trajectory of digitalisation and its ramifications on physical service infrastructure in other countries. While this project proposal directly stems from the prevailing conditions in Tallinn, it prompts consideration that a similar initiative might emerge in the Netherlands in a decade, given the difference in digitalisation progress between the two regions.

Throughout the design process, several noteworthy observations surfaced. Primarily, I followed the initial concept outlined in my research plan, evident in the integration of many key points into the project framework. My objective for this year was to surpass my comfort zone and meticulously develop a project that extends beyond mere materiality, encompassing its entirety in terms of meaning, context, physical manifestation, composition, and technical intricacies.

Furthermore, my research methodology played a crucial role in refining the project, beginning with accessing the Tallinn archive, analysing archival plans and photography, and collecting relevant data. Additionally, employing a research-through-design approach aided in enhancing spatial considerations, such as assessing the compatibility of my concept with the site's characteristics.

This period has been instrumental in crystallising my architectural vision, permitting me to design a structure according to my specifications rather than conforming to external influences.

Personal reflection

However, this effort has not been without its challenges. The complicated task of integrating diverse architectural styles has demanded multiple revisions of the plans to attain a cohesive outcome. Through this process, I have developed a new typology, demonstrating the adaptability of architectural practice to evolving societal needs. Consequently, this project has not only met its objectives but has also broadened my perspective, encouraging awareness of emerging possibilities in the future within a dynamic society.