



*'Recognising that the mind, body, and environment are the wholeness of our being, we reconnect to the world and time' – teamLab 2021*

# Estonian Social Saun Kultuur

*Research plan by Roos Scholten*

# Research plan

## Estonian Social Saun Kultuur

*'Sauna is an instinct. And so, the eternal desire for a sauna is not a miracle, but a natural law – the law of the universe.'* Lord Erasmus Wilson (1809–1884)



*Figuur 1. Wood-fired sauna oven.*

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**sauna**

[ **saw**-nuh, sou- ]

*noun*

1. a bath that uses dry heat to induce perspiration, and in which steam is produced by pouring water on heated stones.
2. a bathhouse or room, usually of wood, equipped for such a bath.

*verb (used without object),sau·naed, sau·na·ing.*

3. to take a sauna: *to sauna after exercising.*

# Introduction



*Figuur 2. Leil (sauna steam) being generated on a smoke sauna stove near Otepää*

This paper aims to investigate the social sauna culture in Estonia. The initial intention was to explore which public spaces in Tallinn offer social interaction in this fragmented city. Arriving in Tallinn, I stumbled upon saunas. As a Dutch-born human being, knowing only the commercial saunas mainly located inside of massive spas, the feeling towards saunas was rather negative. The saunas in Estonia are of a completely other nature. In Estonia it's not a luxury or a quick fix to unwind from life every three months. It is a primal necessity. *'A sauna is the place where people are born and where they die'*.<sup>1</sup> When discovering this rich tradition of saunas, many locals confirmed that Estonians deeply connect with each other in the sauna. On the streets and in shops, Estonians seem almost afraid to make contact, but once in the sauna something tends to happen, one might call it magic.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote by Andres Ojari, Head of Architecture and Urban Planning Department and Curriculum, Professor EKA

When discovering this phenomenon, I instantly determined to dive deep into this tradition. During the location analysis five different saunas scattered around Tallinn were visited. By entering with an open mind, people, spaces, and rituals were observed thoroughly. Somewhere between being whisked by an elderly lady, chatting to complete strangers while sweating like an otter and dipping into Tallinn's crystal-clear sea following a hot sauna, I began to feel the importance of this space. When asked why the sauna is of great value? Most Estonians were unable to even answer, failing to express what to them feels so natural.

Saunas. Where fire forges the synergy of wood, stone, earth, and water and the elements come unite. Saunas are deeply connected to being human. Somewhere in the world stood the very first sauna. People waited around the fire until the large stones became blazing hot. Then the stones were placed in a hut or cave where family members awaited the heat. This is only a guess; the origin of saunas is uncertain and widespread around the world. Saunas date back as far before Greek myths or Estonian writers could remember.<sup>2</sup>



*Figuur 3. Cold swimming after sauna.*

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<sup>2</sup> Nellis, S., Nellis, S., Hobepappel, L., & Hobepappel, U. (2023). *SAUN KULTUUR*.

The fascinating tradition of sauna bathing, rooted in our longing for warmth, bears the collective wisdom of humanity. In a sauna, where the conditions are comfortable, energy can be conserved and our focus shifts away from the search for food. But the importance of the sauna goes beyond mere comfort and warming. Going to the sauna is an opportunity to rest, to revitalize both body and mind, as well as a space for social interaction or personal reflection. In many societies, saunas are sacred places where one can connect with ancestors, spirits, and gods. Originally, sauna visits may have been more for purification rituals than for hygiene. Many cultures considered water to purify the soul or spirit, a belief that seems to have persisted through the ages.<sup>3</sup>

Sauna is a widely recognized concept. Nowadays, saunas are expressed in various ways with a variety of rituals and architecture. The authenticity of sauna bathing is subject to cultures and is constantly changing. Despite ever changing cultures, there are some essential elements in sauna bathing:

- Connecting to the **ancient** spirits, a connection with the forest, its trees and wood. An ancient connection which can take us back thousands of years.
- The sauna is made from little materials. Life is stripped down to **simplicity**.
- Natural forces of the sauna reconnect us with **nature**, where it emphasizes the rhythm of life.
- Sauna engages with our **senses**. The haptic experience of the way the sauna feels, sounds and smells help us fully engage in the present and the phenomenological experience.
- A gathering space for human interaction. The public sauna is a **social** tool, building a community.
- **Leil** is the sacred steam of the sauna. A medium for cleansing, melting away anxieties, tension, and hostility.
- **Slowing down**, getting into the present.<sup>4</sup>

As one local shares with me, “*Saunas in Estonia are the original social network… and still the best social network.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nellis, S., Nellis, S., Hobepappel, L., & Hobepappel, U. (2023). *SAUN KULTUUR*.

<sup>4</sup> Withers, J., & Hawthorn, R. (2021). *social sauna - bathing & wellbeing*. ThermeGroup.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, M. (2021, November 10). *Sauna for the soul Tallinn, Estonia*. OutThere

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*Figuur 4. Smoke is ventilated from an Estonian sauna.*

# Problem statement

The neighborhood of Kopli within Tallinn is an area with history. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many industrial workers came to Kopli because the Russian Empire decided to locate marine shipyards at the coastline of Kopli. These factory workers were provided with a home, but also with saunas. These saunas also functioned as the main bathroom for the workers, since not all their houses were equipped with bathrooms.<sup>6</sup> Kopli has since 1991 been deprived and is currently slowly recovering. It also means that gentrification is a hot topic and big investors are already pointing their arrows on Kopli. Especially the connection with the coastline is a valuable feature. Thus far parts of the coastline in Tallinn are being privatized instead of letting the coastline thrive for the inhabitants of Tallinn.

The type of residence plays an important role in determining the frequency of sauna use. Only a fifth of the people in Tallinn living in big apartment blocks with little space, visit the sauna at least once a week. Whereas one out of four inhabitants living in smaller appartement buildings with more space visit the sauna weekly. The winners are owner-occupied homes, where half of the inhabitants visit the sauna at least once a week. Therefore, people living in private homes are much more likely to use the sauna regularly.<sup>7</sup> Does having more space or income result in more sauna visits, or is it the un-availability of saunas close by the big appartement blocks?

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<sup>6</sup> Orro, O. (2017). *Kopli Sonata. The Russo-Baltic Shipyard*. Museum of Estonian Architecture.

<sup>7</sup> Nellis, S., Nellis, S., Hobepappel, L., & Hobepappel, U. (2023). *SAUN KULTUUR*.





*Figuur 5. Water has a cleansing element in sauna culture – image of documentary Smoke sauna sisterhood.*

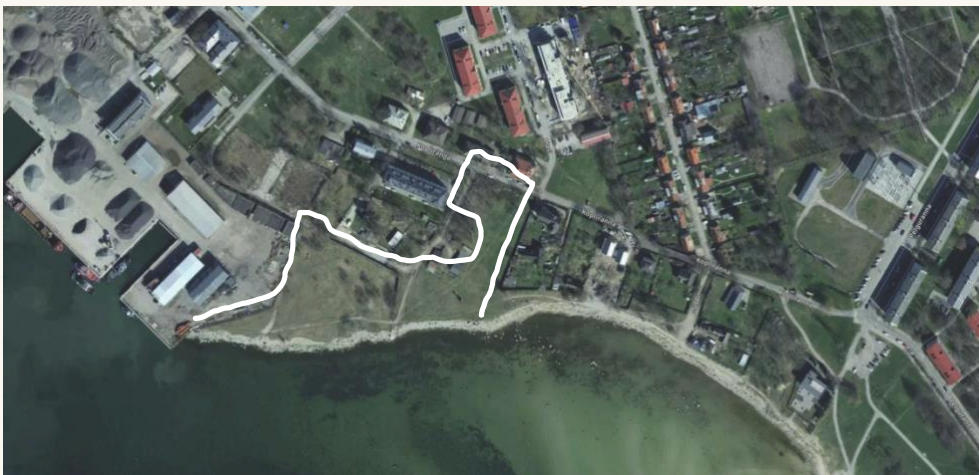


*Figuur 6. Map of Kopli marking Kopliranna*

Public saunas were prominent in the life of Estonians since the Medieval period. At the beginning of the Modern Age, the number of public saunas began to shrink. People were fearful of sickness and disease and saunas tended to be places where these would swarm. Lots of public saunas closed their doors until the 19th century. Hygiene became important for respect and dignity and public saunas were revived. Before the Second World War there were 72 public saunas in Estonia. Around four percent of the population was enjoying these community saunas. Public saunas had a significant importance in the 20th century, such as Kalma Saun built in 1928 in Kalamaja district, Tallin. Many families could not access hot water in the summer months when parts of Tallin were shut off from hot water. Inhabitants would go and wash themselves in the public saunas. Nowadays, it is less popular among Estonians to go to public saunas with only 6% of Tallin's inhabitants engaging in this practice.

31% of Tallinn residents join the sauna in the swimming pool or spa.<sup>8</sup> There are around twelve bigger spa's in Tallinn, around six public saunas and a bunch of saunas that people can privately rent inside cafés, restaurants or other functions.<sup>9</sup> It is unclear whether the fundings for public saunas have been drastically cut by the government or if there is another explanation for the seemingly stagnating numbers of public saunas. In the recently published 2021 book: *Social Sauna – Bathing & Wellbeing*, they aim the revival of public saunas started as is seen in new designs for architecture.

Peninsula and Kopli used to be a place for upper-class inhabitants of Tallinn. Located at the current Kopliranna there was a fisherman's village (see figure 6). Some old traces in housing patterns are kept, however the authentic milieu has been lost. During Soviet times, access to part of the coastline was blocked and it unlocked after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, since then the area has been degraded and there has been a growing demand from locals to 'occupy' the area, partially driven by the fast change and gentrification of the Põhja-Tallinn neighborhood.<sup>10</sup>



Figuur 7. Kopliranna site aerial view – MapTiler

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<sup>8</sup> Nellis, S., Nellis, S., Hobepappel, L., & Hobepappel, U. (2023). *SAUN KULTUUR*.

<sup>9</sup> Own countings from Roos Scholten on Google Maps

<sup>10</sup> Kiisküla, P. (2018). *Waterfront recreation area user behaviour analysis – case of Stroomi and Kopliranna*

*beaches*. <https://dspace.emu.ee/xmlui/handle/10492/4095>



*Figuur 8. Potential site location.*



*Figuur 9. Sauna in the forest – Documentary Smoke sauna sisterhood.*

# Research question and Methodology

The process of designing a public social sauna for the inhabitants of Tallinn with a focus on Kopli, where returning part of the coastal zone to the citizens as a central theme, lead to the main research question:

- *What spatial elements make an Estonian sauna a social space and how can these be implemented in a design for a public sauna for the inhabitants of Tallinn?*

To answer this, the sub-questions are:

- *How can the haptic experience of a sauna be strengthened by design?*
- *What rituals are practiced in Estonian saunas and how can the public sauna incorporate this?*
- *How can the ritual of bathing or dipping in the sea be embodied in the design?*
- *How can minor components of the public sauna help to perceive the human scale?*
- *What role did the sauna play in Estonia and what is its current role in society?*
- *Which materials are essential for the design and how can they be chosen carefully with the haptic qualities of the body in mind?*
- *What significant spatial and social activities already exist around the site and how can these be enriched and captured by the design?*
- *How were saunas built in Estonian history and how are they built nowadays?*



*Figuur 10. Research scheme*



*Figuur 11. Ice water dipping after sauna bathing*

Methodologically, various media and methods will be used to help answer these questions. Five diverse saunas scattered throughout Tallinn are examined true fieldwork. People their rituals and how spatial element play a role in these scenes will be investigated. These encounters are being captured by the art of drawing. This is framed as participatory observation.

Subsequently, a precedent study is performed on Kalma Saun, one of the oldest public saunas in Tallinn. From the analysis of this sauna, several conclusions about use and social connections in the sauna will be extracted. In the process, more case studies will be executed for an accurate understanding of Estonian saunas. Also other saunas outside of Estonia might be investigated if they are found useful for the research.



The main question and sub questions will also be studied using literary reviews. Where *'SAUN kultuur'* (2023) by Siim Nellis will serve as the backbone for this research. The book provides detailed information on the history of saunas worldwide and Estonian sauna traditions and beliefs. It tells about sauna-bathing today and has an overview of sauna habits of Estonians and the health benefits which saunas provide. The final chapter covers the principles of how saunas are built. Modern saunas and the important elements of the sauna are well described in *'Social Sauna - Baths & Wellness'* from the Therme Group. It started as a research article to promote a deeper contemporary understanding of sauna culture and well-being. Eventually, it became a very detailed description of the understanding of saunas and their social nature combined with examples of sauna design nowadays.<sup>11</sup>

The documentary *'Smoke Sauna Sisterhood'* (2023), which won the World Cinema-Documentary directing award, gives an important atmospheric picture of saunas in Estonia and what they mean. In the darkness of a smoke sauna, women share their deepest secrets and intimate experiences, wash off the shame trapped in their bodies and regain their strength through a sense of community.<sup>12</sup>

Watching the documentary *'Steam of Life'* (2010) on saunas and their social impact on men gives a clear picture of the saunas social and communal function.

Reading *'The Eyes of the Skin'* (1996) by Juhani Pallasmaa contributes to a better understanding of the haptic experiences and sensorial aspect captured in saunas.

All this background information, books, visits, films, and articles help to understand sauna culture in Estonia. It provides support to answer the main research question *'What spatial elements make an Estonian sauna a social space and how can they be implemented in a design for a public sauna for Tallinn inhabitants?'* and its sub-questions. Through modelling the spatial qualities of the chosen area and how the public sauna can be positioned in connection with the sea and its surroundings will be investigated. With mock-ups various materials will be explored that are particularly important for the sensory sensation of the sauna. These methods will also be used to capture the human scale in the mundane objects in a sauna. The environment of the public sauna will be envisioned and imagined by drawing, to have a better understanding of how people behave in the sauna and where the design affects this interaction. In answering the research question, the crossing of different fields of study to create a complete picture of the public sauna culture will lead to a coherent and consistent project.

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<sup>11</sup> Withers, J., & Hawthorn, R. (2021). *social sauna - bathing & wellbeing*. ThermeGroup.

<sup>12</sup> *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood (2023)* ☆ 7.9 | Documentary. (2024, January 23).



*Figuur 12. Viht (or vihad in plural) is the bundle of branches Estonians use to beat our bodies with inside the sauna.*



*Figuur 13. The English word is whisk.*

# Relevance

A sauna has many mental, physical, and social health benefits which counteract problems which have been increasing in recent years. ‘Beyond pleasure and relaxation, emerging evidence suggests that sauna bathing has several health benefits, which include reduction in the risk of vascular diseases such as high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease (CVD), stroke, and neurocognitive diseases; nonvascular conditions such as pulmonary diseases including common flu; mortality; treatment of specific skin conditions; as well as pain in conditions such as rheumatic diseases and headache.’<sup>13</sup>

It is evident from statistics that inhabitants of Tallinn with a smaller rental house go to the sauna less often than a homeowner or person in a larger rental house. There are only few public saunas left in Tallinn, with just one public sauna in Kopli. In Estonia, the weather is often cold and rainy, which draws people indoors. More spaces should be created where people can stay and get in touch with each other, themselves, and their bodies. This should not mainly be available to inhabitants with a sauna on their own plot or people with money, but also to people with less money who often have harder living conditions than those with more income. Kopli has one of the lowest income rates in Tallinn.<sup>14</sup>

The Kopli area has been neglected for many years, nowadays gentrification is occurring and old inhabitants of Kopli will be forced to move. Instead of letting the coast of Kopli become an area which is dominated by housing and private spaces, it is essential to create a public space where all Tallinn residents can benefit from the coastline and the communal and social spaces around Kopli can grow.

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<sup>13</sup> Laukkanen, J. A., Laukkanen, T., & Kunutsor, S. K. (2018). Cardiovascular and Other Health Benefits of sauna Bathing: A Review of the evidence. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 93(8), 1111–1121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mayocp.2018.04.008>

<sup>14</sup> Tallin Government. (2019). *Kuu keskmise brutotulu Tallinna asumites, 2019*. Tallinn. <https://www.tallinn.ee/et/media/306637>

*'Start by placing the stones on the oven and feel the shape of each one. Appreciate their stone-ness, and their earthiness, and ask the spirit of the Earth beneath your feet to bless them. Then touch the water in its bucket ... and ask the spirits of all the cold northern rivers and lakes to bless it. Then light the fire, preferably with flint and steel or an even older method. As you do this, ask the fire to bless and cleanse you. Sing to it if you can because it likes song... Wait patiently while the fire warms the room and stones. Whisper just loud enough for you to hear: "From Fire and Stone.. all creation" 'Northern Traditions Sauna' from Raven Kaldera, Wightridden: Paths of Northern Tradition Shamanism<sup>15</sup>*



*Figuur 14. Roos Scholten in the Iglu Sauna Tallinn*

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<sup>15</sup> Withers, J., & Hawthorn, R. (2021). *social sauna - bathing & wellbeing*. ThermeGroup.

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Figure 2. <https://medium.com/estoniansaunas/can-saunas-cure-corona-virus-a73a24b8a2e5>

Figure 3. <https://medium.com/estoniansaunas/heres-our-plan-to-make-100-estonian-saunas-more-famous-around-the-world-cf09e4cf348c>

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Figure 7. Own map

Figure 8. Own pictures

Figure 9. <https://www.maptiler.com/maps/#style=hybrid&mode=2d&position=16.21/59.451216/24.678208>

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Figure 11. Own scheme with image:  
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Figure 13. <https://www.visitestonia.com/en/sauna-session-in-a-traditional-old-voromaa-smoke-sauna-at-mooska>

Figure 14. <https://filmmakermagazine.com/118294-interview-anna-hints-smoke-sauna-sisterhood/>

Figure 15. Own picture made by Sam Knuiif