

THE ARCHITECTURE OF DEMOCRACY

An inquiry into the state and potential of the public realm
in a post-soviet context

// Bálint Kerekes

CONTENTS

	3	Position
PART I //		PROBLEMATISATION
	4	Introduction
	5	State of public space
	6	Spatial Requirements of Democracy
	7	Research Question
PART II //		STRUCTURE OF RESEARCH
	8	Theoretical Framework
	9	Historical Framework
	10	Methodology
	12	Research Diagram
PART III //		FURTHER INFORMATION
	14	Past Analysis
	15	Reflection
	16	Bibliography
	17	Figures

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POSITION

As a young adult, the connection between my forming political awareness and the discipline I chose to study seemed far-fetched; and it was not until the start of my master's that the link concretised in my mind. The book *Architectural Positions*, which explicitly deals with the connection between the public sphere and architecture, pointed me in the direction to explore this intersection, which I believe is of paramount importance for our profession.

Our notion of the public sphere is inherently tied to Western ideas of democracy.¹ As Habermas explains, it is where political decisions are being debated;² and the existence of a domain where ideas can be freely expressed and exchanged is both a necessary precondition of human freedom and the backbone of democracy.³ At the same time, he believes it is in decline, and might disappear,⁴ which highlights what's at stake: a fundamental condition for democratic performance.⁵ The question for architects is clear: what position can we take regarding the public sphere?⁶ In my research, I intend to situate myself within, and to contribute to this debate.

The research is set in Tallinn, capital of Estonia. As an outsider, I lack both the insight into the day-to-day of Estonian politics and the cultural-historical background of the proceedings. Therefore, by no means do I intend to address current affairs or party politics per se; on the other hand, from an etic perspective I have the opportunity to focus on more structural issues with the public sphere in the former Eastern block.

As a Hungarian national, I am especially interested in the common themes in this region; I believe the shared aspects of history amount to a context which differs from that addressed by Western literature [which - undeniably - forms the basis of discourse in the whole of Europe, including this paper], and thus necessitates research directly concerned with it. I am glad that my research and graduation project is situated in in this context, and I am sure Tallinn will be a fertile ground for such investigations. I hope that this research will amount new knowledge through design; an approach which, with adaptations, can be utilised in other locations as well.

1 // Tom Avermaete, Klaske Havik, and Hans Teerds, *Architectural Positions: Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2009), 18.

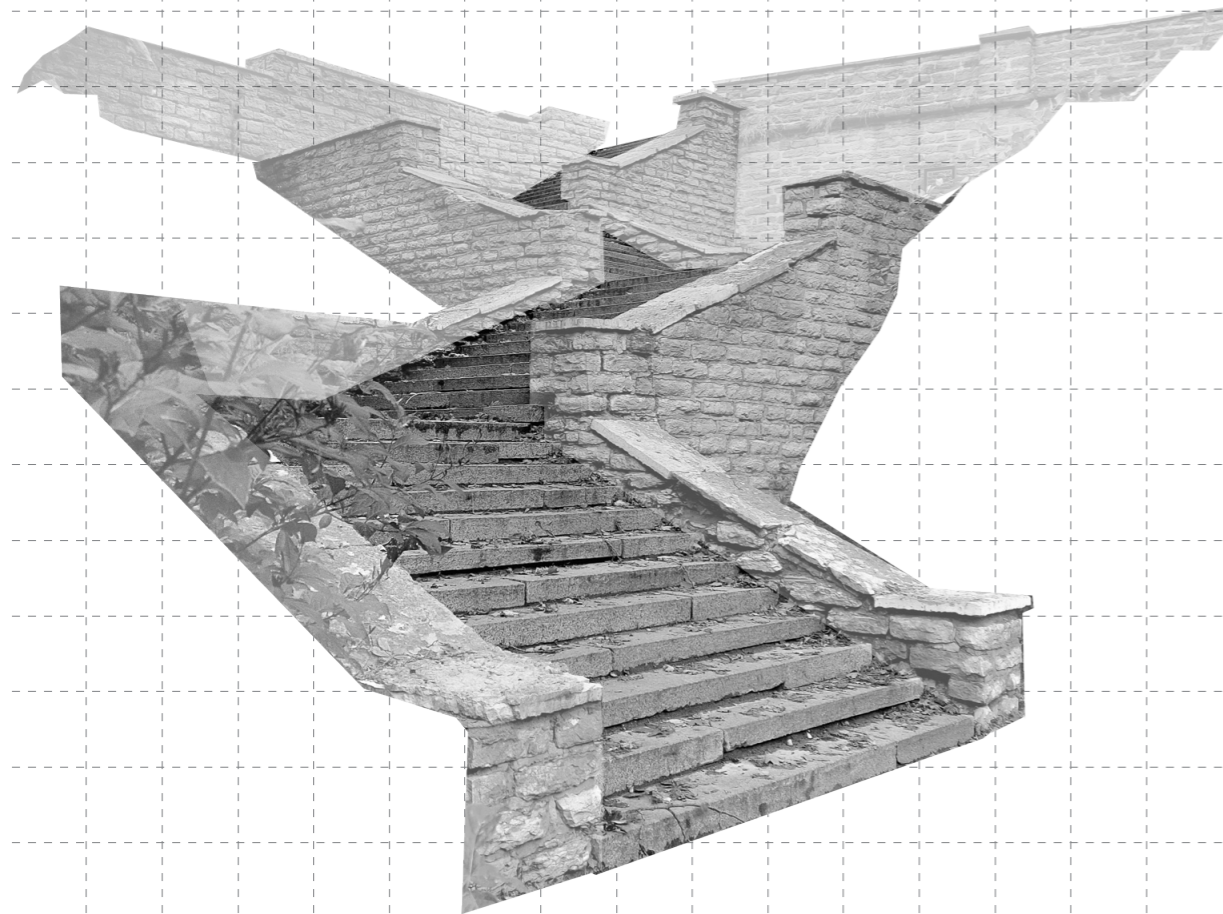
2 // Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1991).

3 // *ibid.*

4 // *ibid.*

5 // John Parkinson, *Democracy & Public Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

6 // Tom Avermaete, Klaske Havik, and Hans Teerds, *Architectural Positions: Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2009), 19.



INTRODUCTION

On 23 August 1987, the underground political group MRP-AEG organised their first protest supporting their demand of the public disclosure of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.⁷ The date was not coincidental: it was the 48th anniversary of the agreement which led to the invasion of the Republic of Estonia in World War two. They did not expect a high turnout⁸ - although the political climate was changing Gorbachev's reforms [perestroika, glasnost and uskorenije], it was still unheard of to challenge the communist regime. However, the thousands of people who flooded the town hall square caught even the authorities off-guard, who blocked off Toompea Hill, and ordered the crowd to move to Hirvepark instead.⁹ It was on the zig-zagging stairs at the foot of the castle where the first public speeches against the authoritarian state were made [1.1], now commemorated by a bench [1.2]. The meeting was peaceful from start to finish; as one of the organisers, Lagle Parek recalls,

“We dissolved just in time and our hearts were singing. It was an incredible gathering of people...”¹⁰



1.1 // MRP Public Rally, 23 August, 1987.



1.2 // Memorial plate in Hirvepark [image by author].

The meeting was a major breakthrough in the development of Estonia as it showed that public opposition to the system was becoming possible,¹¹ and sparked a wave of mass gatherings which ultimately led to the restoration of Estonia's independence. These assemblies - unlike in many other countries of the Eastern Block - remained peaceful; yet, when 300,000 people sing patriotic songs in a city of 450,000 [1.3],¹² or when 700,000 people queue up in a human chain for freedom in a 1.6 million country [1.4],¹³ it simply cannot be ignored. For me, looking at the events of the so-called 'Singing Revolution'

1 // shows that there exists a strong tradition of mass gatherings in Estonia
2 // demonstrates what convening for a cause can achieve and

3 // reveals how much of politics is spatial, staged in the physical public domain

These observations are taken as the core hypotheses underpinning the research.



1.3 // Estonians at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds, 11 September 1988.



1.4 // Baltic Way in Tallin, 23 August 1989.

7 // Teder, Tarmo, "Information bulletin - ice breaker of free press," Postimees, 30 September, 1998.

8 // Suurkask, Heiki, "Hirvepark - a place where free thought broke through," Eesti Päevaleht, August 17, 2007.

9 // *ibid.*

10 // *ibid.*

11 // Subrenat Jean-Jacques, *Estonia: Identity and Independence* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 228.

12 // Tambur, Silver and Helen Wright, "The Baltic Way - the longest unbroken human chain in history ." *estonian world*, August 23, 2021.

13 // Robin Lodge, "Human Chain Spanning". Reuters News, 23 August 1989.

THE STATE OF PUBLIC SPACE

The Singing Revolution had a clearly defined goal - independence, which was declared on 20 August 1991. In this process, public space was accommodating political action, emerging as a mediatory space "between civil society and the state".¹⁴ However, as Neil Smith and Setha Low describe in the *Politics of Public Space*, "the implosion of official communism...and the consequent neoliberal onslaught"¹⁵ have fundamentally altered the conception of public space - not just in Estonia, but also globally. In late capitalism, "large organisations strive for political compromises with the state and with each other, excluding the public whenever possible".¹⁶

Neoliberal spatial developments - which seek for return of investment above all else - de-politicise public spaces by transforming them into spaces of consumption or transit. The availability of space in which public roles can be performed has been drastically reduced;¹⁷ new ownership and management structures reduce accessibility,¹⁸ while heavy programming makes them harder to appropriate for public claim-making.¹⁹ For the state, the phenomenon is rather convenient: it is not just that private enterprises are taking over tasks [and with them responsibilities], but the increasing detachment of politics from the physical realm conceals their inner workings even further than the unavoidable abstraction inherent to deliberative democracies.

Estonia was caught in the middle of the turmoil: economic reforms led to almost the polar opposite of the previous, state-controlled system - for instance, Estonia is one of the few counties in the EU with a flat income tax, and excessive privatisation has virtually abolished social housing in Tallinn. And while the situation is far better than in the 90s,²⁰ the city still has lesser influence on spatial developments than in other European countries: the city architect's office has very limited resources, and often performs a solely advisory role only.²¹ The 'comprehensive plan' covering the entire city is rather vague, while the 'detail plans' address the city in fragments²² - the latter are easily amendable to attract the foreign investments needed for the realisation of larger projects.

The results are clear: the empirical experience of a city with disproportionate prices to wages and a lack of non-consumerist public space is supported by ample literature on gentrification. Alongside the privatisation of public spaces, the Estonian state presents an extreme case of detachment from the physical realm. The E-Estonia project is undeniably a success story in digitalising the state, which rightfully brands itself as "the world's most advanced digital society";²³ at the same time, human interactions are drastically reduced, and government buildings are becoming empty shells.

14 // Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1991), xi.

15 // Smith, Neil, and Setha Low. *The Politics of Public Space*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 1.

16 // Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1991), 54.

17 // Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 40.

18 // Smith, Neil, and Setha Low. *The Politics of Public Space*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 1.

19 // John Parkinson, *Democracy & Public Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18.

20 // see Lehtovuori, Panu, and Klaske Havik. "Tallinna vuonna 9

= tallinn in year 9." *Arkkitehti*, 96(3), 18-25.

21 // Epner, Pille. *City Unfinished: Urban Visions of Tallinn* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia arhitektuuri ja linnaplaneerimise osakond, 2021), 31.

22 // *ibid.*, 32.

23 // EAS, "e-Estonia story".

SPATIAL REQUIREMENTS OF DEMOCRACY

Undeniably, digitalisation has far-reaching consequences for the public sphere: although mass media played a central role in Habermas' theories already, the dispersion of new forms of media through information networks means that "the public sphere is not just a bourgeois indulgence, but a global phenomenon",²⁴ which cannot be pinned to a fixed location. This might prompt us to think the physical has lost importance; however, the *means* of communication should not be confused with *what* is being communicated. Digital media requires material sites and flesh-and-blood actors for image transmission; on the one hand, this can be criticised for receding directly lived events into representation,²⁵ but on the other, highlights the importance of physical space, "even in our allegedly digital world."²⁶

As John Parkinson argues in *Democracy & Public Space*, highly visible stages as indispensable for the functioning of democracy, both for binding collective decision-making [legislation] to be accepted, and public claim-making [activism/protest] to be taken seriously.²⁷ In the first instance, a single, identifiable location ensures the scrutiny of elected officials; in the second, the proximity to this location and other symbolic places allows citizens to position themselves for, or against their symbolic values.²⁸

24 // John Parkinson, *Democracy & Public Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

25 // see Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

26 // John Parkinson, *Democracy & Public Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

27 // *ibid.*, 16.

28 // *ibid.*, 18.

29 // "Interview with Toomas Paaver" in Riha, Tadeas, Laura Linsi, Roland Reemaa (eds.), *Weak Monument: Architectures Beyond the Plinth* (Zürich, Switzerland: Park Books, 2018), 65.

Considering the Hirvepark meeting through these lenses reveals how these spatial conditions manifest in reality. When visiting the site in person during the excursion, the reasoning behind the speeches venue became immediately apparent: from the audience's point of view, Toompea Castle becomes the backdrop for the stage which the stairs are [1.5]. The castle never ceased to be a location of authority - it was used by the Supreme Soviet then, but it hosts the parliament even today. The iconography of Toompea made the demonstrator's message clear; at the same time, its vertical disposition preserves a certain hierarchy of power, which enables the decision-makers to insulate themselves from public displeasure. This insulation can also manifest in physical form: during the 1991 coup in the USSR, the local branch of government barricaded off all entrances to the castle [1.6], transforming it into the kind of fortification it was originally intended to be.²⁹

As we see, the properties of the physical venues of politics influence what activities can take place, and can amplify, or mute them. From this claim, a great deal follows for architecture, the discipline which thrives on defining these very spatial arrangements.



1.5 // *Hirvepark Stairs* [image by author].



1.6 // *Barricades on Toompea*, January 1991.



RESEARCH QUESTION

Once an explicit connection between spatial arrangement and the performance of public roles has been established, clear and urgent research themes emerge. The main aim of the research is to advocate for the importance of democratic public spaces by answering the main research question:

How can architectural interventions improve the democratic performance of public space in Tallinn?

Researching through design, this question will be answered by a holistic architectural proposal. Before this design can be developed, however, a set of sub-questions need to be answered first in order to lay the foundations for the project.

Theoretical framework //

What is public space? How can the democratic performance of a public space be assessed?

Historical framework //

How have public spaces in Tallinn accommodate the performance of public roles in the past? What parts of history are embedded in the monuments and buildings of the state, and how are they represented?

The answers to these questions will inform the selection of a **site** for the project, as well as finding an appropriate **program** which can meet the research aims.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceiving of the public sphere through architectural form is by no means a novel aim;³⁰ however, historical precedents [from Ledoux to Corbusier and further] often shows architects asserting their ideals and imposing a material reality not grounded in the sociological context. As an alternative, I propose an interdisciplinary approach, stemming from the productive intersection of political and urban theories in order to understand the spatial requirements.

The notion of space is a pivotal issue in this research. To avoid misunderstandings regarding the terminology, I take up on the Lefebvrian criticism of the semiotics of the word in the Production of Space,³¹ and will restrain its use to refer to the tangible space in which we exist. Meanwhile, public sphere // public domain will be used to refer to more abstract concepts.

'Public space', despite all efforts for its categorisation, remains somewhat vague of a term. It's meaning today is very much bound up with the public-private opposition,³² a dichotomy which repeatedly fails in practice. Sennett considers the resulting ambiguity to be a threat to the public sphere;³³ a literature review is therefore needed to find a working definition. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proposes ownership, accessibility, and purpose as the defining factors in the evaluation;³⁴ however, as Parkinson explains, ownership fails to deal with unparcelled public territories. Instead, he introduces a four binaries on accessibility, common resources, common effects, and the performance of public roles.³⁵ The last aspect is particularly interesting: the performative nature of public life was also one of Sennett's main concerns, and this notion of drama will be taken forward.

30 // Giedion, Sigfried, Josep Lluís Sert, and Ferdinand Léger. "Nine Points on Monumentality." In Siegfried Giedion, *Architecture You and Me* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 48-52.

31 // Lefebvre, Henri, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA.: Blackwell, 2009), 6.

32 // Smith, Neil, and Setha Low. *The Politics of Public Space*. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 4.

33 // Sennett, quoted in Tom Avermaete, Klaske Havik, and Hans Teerds, *Architectural Positions: Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2009), 43.

34 // "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen" (1798),

in Tom Avermaete, Klaske Havik, and Hans Teerds, *Architectural Positions: Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2009), 40.

35 // John Parkinson, *Democracy & Public Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10.

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

The 20th century history of Estonia is a delicate subject, which inevitably needs to be accounted for during the research. During the excursion, the aftermath of the last century was felt even in everyday interactions, let alone the wider social and political aspects, from which the built environment is no exception.

The monument is of distinguished importance: as Aldo Rossi explains, they are tangible signs of collective memory, and thus belong to the history of society.³⁶ The *Weak Monument* publication, which accompanied Estonia's 2018 contribution to the Venice Architectural Biennale [2.1], has a vital role in deepening my understanding of Estonian history, and has raised my awareness for the contentious nature of cultural symbols in the country. Analysing how these monuments are perceived now is indispensable for understanding how the public sphere is represented, and for devising an appropriate architectural language for the design project.

This phenomenological part of the research - which looks at buildings as passive containers of history in the present - will be accompanied by ethnographical praxeology investigating past temporalities of public spaces, focusing on the human actions that took place inside them. Through archival research, notable gatherings will be reconstructed in order to understand how public spaces have historically contained public acts, as a means to understand how they perform as part of the public sphere.

Alongside the events and locations mentioned in the intersection, I am looking at Freedom Square [2.2], Loosi Plats in Toompea Castle [2.3], and Town Hall Square [2.4] to analyse.



2.1 // Stúdio Stúdio, *Graphic design for the book Weak Monument* [online]. <https://studiostudio.ee/studiostudio/wp-content/>

2.2 // *Demonstration on Victory Square, January 1991.*



2.3 // *Worker's demonstration in Toompea Castle, 21 June 1940.*



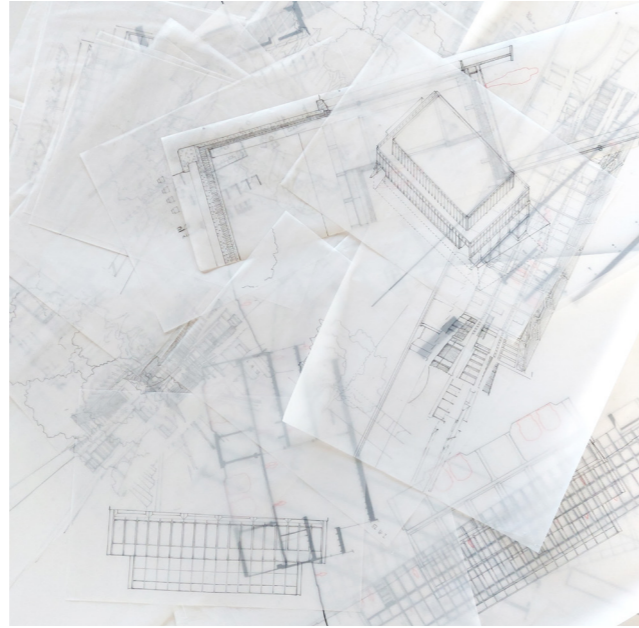
2.4 // *Military ceremony on Town Hall Square, 1919.*



METHODOLOGY

The proposed methodology for executing the research builds upon architecture's disciplinary toolkit, in order to ensure that the outcomes of the interdisciplinary approach will be applicable to an architectural project. The most conventional way of representing an architectural project is through orthographic views: plan, elevation, and section - the importance of these historically embedded projections for the development of architecture cannot be understated. Etymologically, orthography means 'straight' or 'correct scratching'; anthropologically, it is a geometric gesture of arranging recognisable marks.³⁷ Orthography can be both written and drawn; for architects, drawing these orthographic views is as natural as writing, which I can conform from experience - I work through scaled orthographic sketches from the beginning of a project [2.5].

Another important consideration is the relationship between the different views, which might seem evident today, although it only gained its mathematical basis in descriptive geometry during the enlightenment, allowing for the whole to be unambiguously represented through a set of views which partially represent the object.³⁸ In a similar manner, I intend to employ these views to analyse different aspects of public spaces in Tallinn; and it is only through their synthesis that I will get a more encompassing view.



2.5 // Drawings of Bachelor thesis project [image by author].

// PLAN

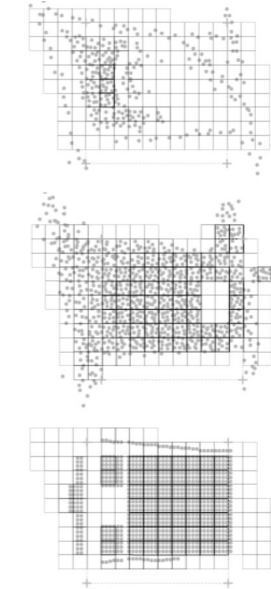
The plan is appropriate for the analysis of historical gatherings, and the existing network of public spaces in Tallinn. Protests are usually denoted with the number of attendees, and a location - the relationship between the two is lost after the event. With the ethnographic plans, I will analyse the capacity of public spaces; how the individual relates to the crowd, and the crowd to the limits of the space they inhabit [2.6 & 2.7]. These plans will contribute to the praxeological branch of research.

// ELEVATION

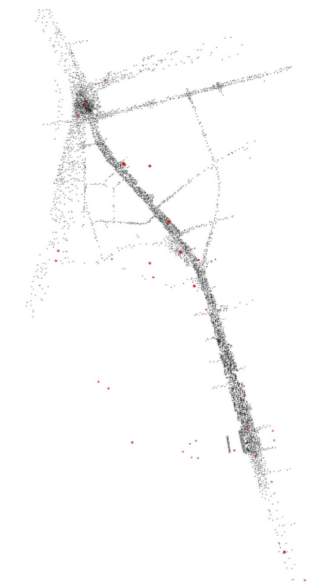
The elevation is particularly suitable for studying the representational qualities of built form: historic styles and symbols, the scale of monuments, and the relation of the human body to monumental forms [2.8 & 2.9]. Revealing how monuments and monumental buildings are perceived, elevations will be of use for the phenomenological branch of research.

// SECTION

The section, in many regards, is a synthesis drawing itself, which relates the plan to vertical dimensions. In this case, it will be used to analyse the relationship between the public spaces and the monuments that frame them, revealing their permeability, and the topography of urban space. The locations of the analysed sites of gatherings and representation will be overlaid in order to determine the locations for the sections; based on my research until now, the relation of Toompea castle to the parks surrounding it [including Hirvepark] shows potential. This sectioning exercise will be used to find the site for the design project; ideally, an area with considerable tension between the public space and its surroundings.



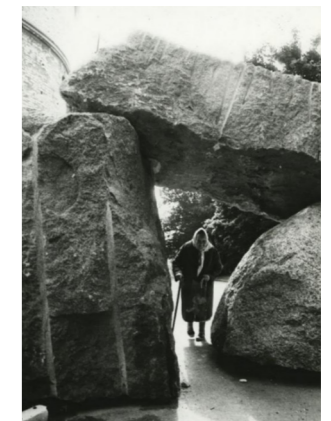
2.6 // Framing Protest
Different uses of a public square in Strasbourg, France



2.7 // Traces of Protest
Spatial temporalities of protest in Santiago, Chile



2.8 // RAM
[Rahvastikuministrid] on Toompea, 1980.



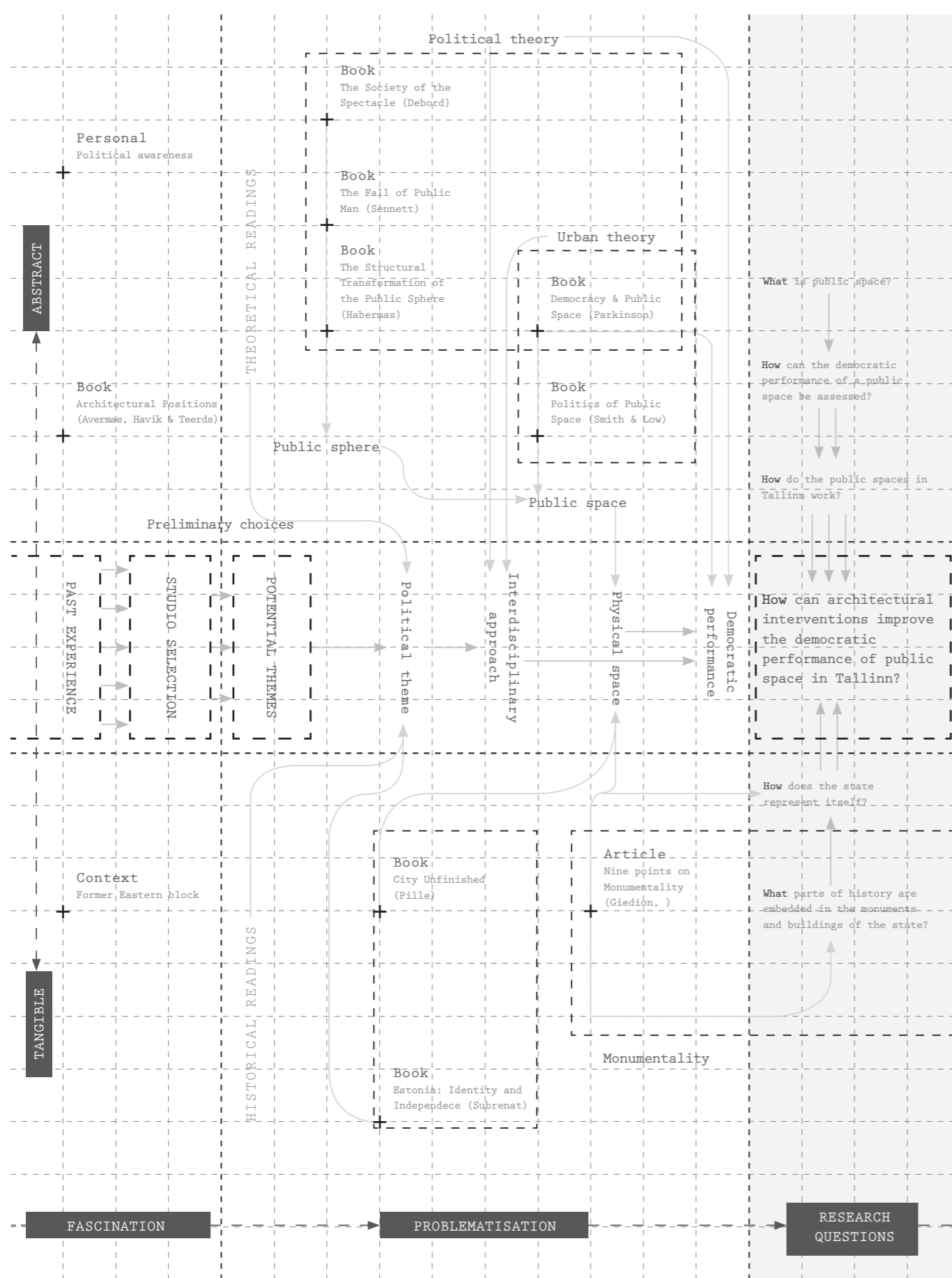
2.9 // Aunt between stones, January 1991.

37 // John May, "Everything is Already an Image", Log 40, (Spring/Summer 2017): 14.

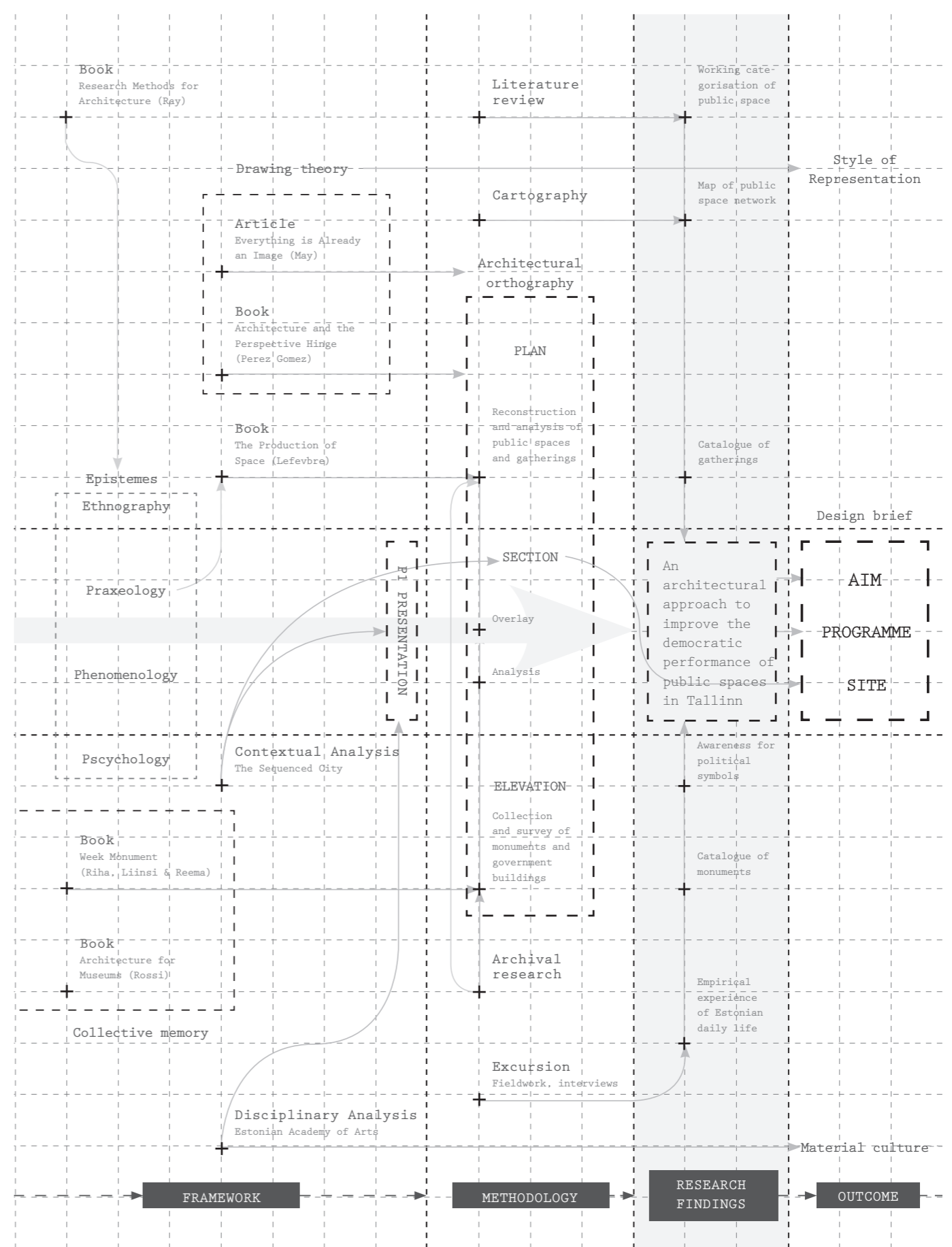
38 // Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1997), 3.

RESEARCH DIAGRAM

Structure of Research



The Architecture of Democracy



Balint Kerekas

PAST ANALYSIS

// CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

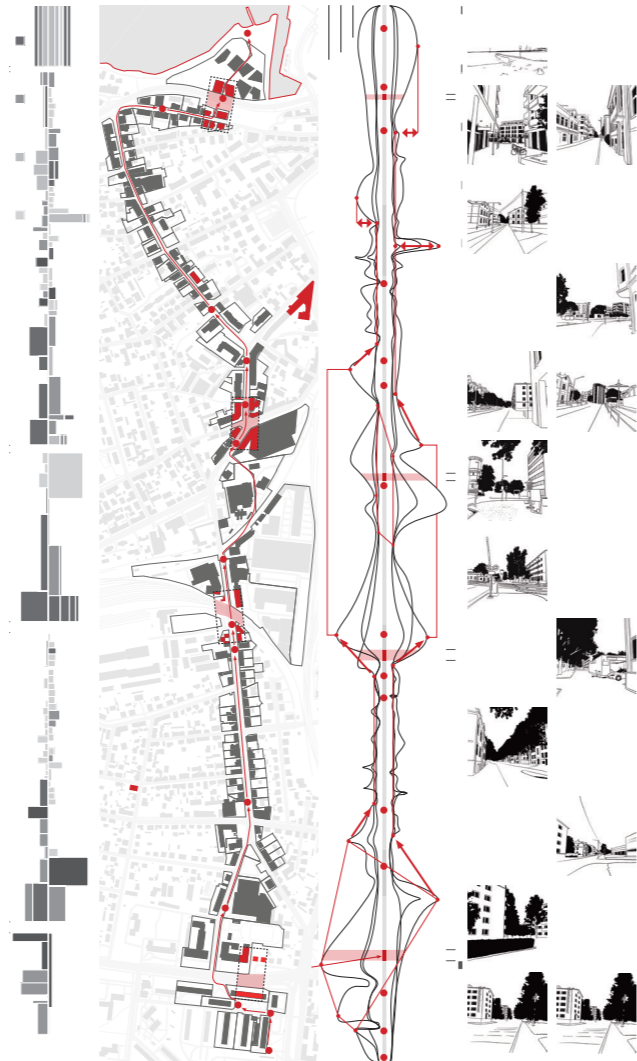
In the contextual analysis, we have investigated the concepts of borders and neighbourhood characteristics along a line just north of the historic centre of Tallinn. The knowledge acquired during the process, especially on how difference structures the urban fabric, will be taken forward to identify points of detachment between public spaces and their context. Although a section - as a projection - was not drawn for the entire line, this exercise demonstrated the potential of cutting across a city, and overlaying different modes of analysis to grasp the essence of what is there [3.1].

// DISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

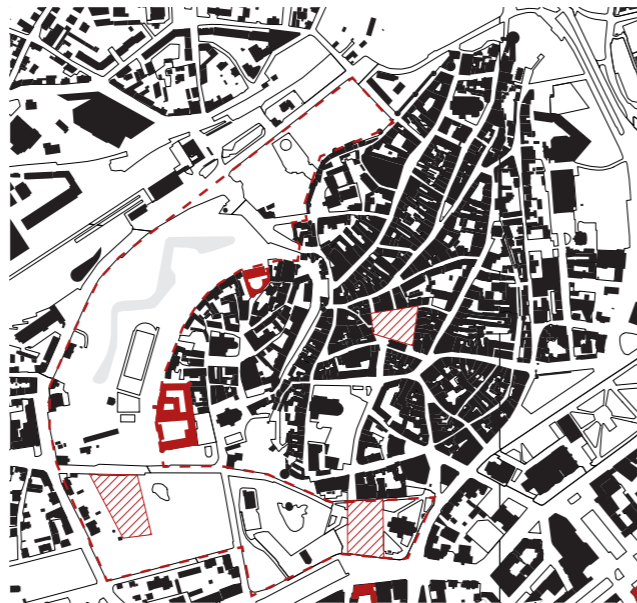
For the disciplinary analysis, I have conducted a precedent study of the building of the Estonian Academy of Arts, located on the opposite site of the bastion park surrounding the historic centre. The 2017 retrofit of the factory complex in my view is exemplary in how the existing fabric can, and is being dealt with in Tallinn, and will certainly inform the material culture of my design proposal with relation to the existing.

// EXCURSION

A two-week excursion was made to Tallinn in the first half of October, which backs up the academic research with the personal, empirical experience of the city. As a studio, we walked excessively through the city, and the contrast between the old town and its surroundings was striking. Toompea Castle is an island within the already secluded centre; our walks did not even include it, which sparked my curiosity to understand its dual role in the city - both a passive monument and an active place of politics [3.2].



3.1 // Contextual analysis
Fragment of poster



3.2 // Context map. Government buildings shaded red, gathering spaces hatched in red.

REFLECTION

It is the first time that I use an academic, theory-led approach to develop a design brief, which certainly feels like a leap of faith into the unknown when compared to projects where the site or programme is set first. Simultaneously, I have a gut feeling that if I trust the process, the theoretical approach can establish a solid framework which will pay dividends in later decision-making during the design process.

I have definitely struggled with keeping the theoretical research within bounds - there is a natural urge to read everything, which I realised is neither possible, nor it is necessary. During research, the ideas one comes across are naturally conflicting after a while, which necessitated the critical assessment of the texts, and forced me to define my position.

As the first formal deliverable of the year, the pressure of a year-long graduation project was definitely felt. I am not a fast writer; this time, however, I wrote with half my usual speed even after overcoming the writer's block. The P1 presentation was pivotal to arranging my thoughts, and gave me the confidence for putting this paper together. Going forward, I will aim to set smaller sub-deliverables to execute between the presentations as well, to see the project gradually coming together instead of keeping it in my head for too long.

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FIGURES

- 1.1 // A, Ahonen. *MRP Public Rally*. Photo. Eesti Ajaloomuuseum. August 23, 1987. <https://opendata.muis.ee/object/2080579>.
- 1.2 // *Memorial bench in Hirvepark*. Image by author.
- 1.3 // *Estonians at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds*. Photo. Estonianworld. 11 September, 1988. <https://opendata.muis.ee/object/2080579>.
- 1.4 // Vaidla, Gunnar. *Baltic Way in Tallin*. Estonianworld. <https://estonianworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Baltic-Way-in-Tallinn-Gunnar-Vaidla.png>
- 1.5 // *Hirvepark Stairs*. Image by author.
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