Critique of Industrialization and Non-Institutional Architecture: Architectural Exhibition by the Tallinn School in 1978

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There exists a certain discrepancy between the Soviet architectural discourse and art discourse from the late 1950s onwards, after the period of de-Stalinization. If in architecture industrialization was openly embraced and adopted as the only key to architectural form, then in art the rigorous realist principles of the 1940s and 1950s were modified but remained the official aesthetic line until almost the end of the Soviet Union. The parallel counterdiscourse of modernist abstraction and artistic autonomy that emerged in the same decade, remained unofficial, yet powerful, and retrospectively Soviet artistic life has been often presented through the opposition of these two sides: official realist art and non-conformist or unofficial abstract art. In what follows, I will discuss an architectural exhibition from 1978 in Tallinn, Estonia, which was organized by architects and designers operating simultaneously in the spheres of art and architecture. Countering on the one hand the unofficial or modernist medium-specific art discourse with the aesthetics of design, they also opened up a new field of critique of industrial architecture.

The official dogma of in Soviet art, Socialist Realism, had its roots in the Stalinist-Zhdanovist discourse\(^1\) of the 1930s. Nevertheless, after 1955 this rigorous aesthetic approach unofficially loosened up,\(^2\) bringing forth a more pluralist art scene that included artists with very different aesthetic preferences. After an open rejection of modernist artworks in the Manezh exhibition in Moscow in 1962\(^3\) the more liberal wing of artists had to retreat into exhibition spaces and sites that were not associated with official art institutions and galleries, thus forming the non-conformist or unofficial scene. Non-conformist art could not be defined content- or media-wise (or stylistically) as it

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included artists with very different approaches to art (from more traditionalist, and widespread, Neo-Expressionism to conceptual art in the 1970s). But equally complicated is the definition of the non-conformists from the institutional perspective, as several artists identified with these circles were members of the Artist’s Union (although mostly not as painters or sculptors but as book illustrators or exhibition designers) and thus entitled to privileges of the union members (e.g., subsidized studio space, regular purchases, travel abroad).

For many of these artists in the 1950s and 1960s it was important to restore notions of aesthetic value and artistic autonomy in their works; an artwork was considered an apolitical, self-centered object that offered aesthetic pleasure. The quality and value of the piece was guaranteed by novel form and skillful craftsmanship. Trying in contrast to Socialist Realism to show that “there is more to art than just political propaganda,” one of the ways for the artist to stress his/her opposition was by elaborating a personal handwriting. By the beginning of 1970s this canon had also established itself in art criticism and writing, thus coming close to modernist art discourse in the West.

At the end of 1960s a new group of artists and architects emerged in Estonia who countered this rhetoric of self-enclosed art with an interest in everyday surroundings, the transforming cityscape and industrial culture—subjects that in a different form had been enforced also in Socialist Realism and were associated with the dominant ideology discourse. The 1960s generation however turned their gaze to Pop Art and conceptualism and established an open dialogue with the Western “neo” avant-garde. Mostly trained as architects or industrial designers (the group included Leonhard Lapin, Jüri Okas, Vilen Künnapu, and Toomas Rein), these artists turned to alternative aesthetic theories from their field. In architecture, modernism and industrialization had after 1955 became the official dictum; Stalinist decorativeness and the Beaux-Arts tradition prevalent earlier in the decade were condemned and a new technocratic approach to the built environment was embraced. During the 1960s also emerged a revived interest in the history of Constructivism and the radical art of 1920s Russia that offered a counterbalance to this discourse. Art was in this context understood foremost as a means for creating a new living environment; not only the (realist) reflection of existing reality but also the creation of a new one. This “aesthetics of technicality” had a number of reverberations in architecture and design production of the late 1960s and early 1970s but also art and architecture exhibitions.

In June 1978 this group of young architects organized an exhibition in the hallway of the Academy of Sciences Library in Tallinn, the core of the group later became known as the Tallinn School of architects. Architectural Exhibition 1978 focused on the critique of the architectural institution as well as the system-built new town that from the mid-1960s onwards was viewed as a monotonous environment and was experienced as alien to the existing city.

The hallway of the Academy of Sciences had been a place mostly for exhibitions about the lives and works of significant scientists, usually displaying books and periodicals on low horizontal stands; a contemporary architecture show was an exception in these premises. At the same time scientific institutions had offered shelter for contemporary art exhibitions outside the institutional system, in Moscow already since the mid-1960s, in Estonia two significant non-institutional exhibitions had taken place in 1973 and 1975 in the premises of an agricultural research institute. Yet when in the latter case the exhibition sites were located outside the city and the public was taken there with
specially organized buses, the Academy of Sciences library was in the very centre of the city, the most visited library in Tallinn, and situated by Lenin Avenue, literally opposite the local Communist Party Central Committee building.

The show was organized in two parts, with some examples of the architects’ built works on black-and-white photos near the entrance and projects/artworks lined up along the large glazed wall of the foyer. The pieces were drawn on one by one-meter cardboard panels, which was the standard format also in the state architecture offices for exhibiting architectural designs (the participants had access to this material through their workplaces). Thus it adopted the usual format of architectural exhibitions of the time and allowed the viewer to understand the projects foremost as architectural design. This generic format (and the generic title) could partly explain the agitated reception of the exhibition, as the critical content did not correspond to what was expected from a usual architectural display.

The biggest stir in the exhibition was produced by Leonhard Lapin's work *The City of the Living—The City of the Dead* (fig. 1); Jüri Okas remembered it as a big surprise also to the other participants in the show.

![Leonhard Lapin, „City of the Living – City of the Dead”, 1978, 100x100, gouache, courtesy Leonhard Lapin.](image)

The design proposed to create cemeteries in between the panel houses in the public areas, usually used for parking cars or walking dogs. The cemetery would include garages as tombs and bodies would be buried in cars; and the area could function simultaneously as a children's playground. In the details the drawing features several direct allusions to the official architectural institutions, including the grave of the head of the Architect’s Union, Mart Port, with an obelisk at the very centre of the picture (titled *M. Sadamm, the Leader*) and the common grave of the Architect’s Union. This idea for improving the stark residential areas meant extending the concept of the new towns *ad absurdum*: that the inhabitants need never leave the areas, "they need never cross the highways." On the other hand, in a review to the exhibition a writer Mati Unt relates the proposal to the concept of *memento mori* that would restore the missing human dimension in new towns (for which he uses English word “suburbs”): “One hardly ever sees the dead in new towns and we do not know where people disappear after their death, to the air, to earth, or to hell.” Thus the work has been seen as a way to switch the new town into a traditional time flow, into the cycle of birth and death.

The task of the architects in this changed understanding of towns was to “humanize, mystify, poeticize, psychologize.” The multiple undefined grasslands, wide straight roads, regular windows, and white walls were seen as hostile and something to be changed. “A new spirit is coming to cities,” writes Mati Unt in the above review of the exhibition. One significant feature about the show was its humor and parody directed...
against the dominant architectural discourse, but also in some instances self-caricature. This includes Lapin’s *Architectural Styles in the 20th Century* (classifying the participants’ wedding photos according to their clothing styles), Ain Padrik’s *Exhibitionist House* (fig. 2), Vilen Künnapu’s montage drawings *House on a Metaphysical Field* (fig. 3), or Jüri Okas’ *Monument to Lapin in Räpina* (fig. 4), which is Lapin’s birthplace. The design of the latter includes a found steel plate with earthwork in front and instructions on how to inscribe the name on it. Significantly it is this self-reflective and parodic architectural image that applies to several reviewers of the show and that was opposed to what one of the reviewers saw as “overall seriousness” that so far had surrounded the discipline (modernist architect-as-engineer).

Fig. 2: Ain Padrik, „Exhibitionist House“, 1978, 100x100, courtesy Leonhard Lapin.

Fig. 3: Vilen Künnapu, Design for a flower shop in Väike–Karja street, Tallinn, 1978; „Design“ 1978, 100x100, „A House above a Metaphysical Field“, 1978, 100x100, courtesy Leonhard Lapin.

Fig. 4: Jüri Okas, „Object for Räpina“, 1978, 100x100, photo, courtesy Leonhard Lapin.

Countering the seriousness of bureaucratic Soviet ideology but also modernist professionalism (the specialist culture criticized earlier by Lapin) with laughter, games, and parody had been a recurrent strategy for this group of artists and architects from the beginning of the 1970s. For example in happenings and often spontaneous actions in public places absurd and seemingly pointless conduct stood against daily rationality and normativity. The exhibition in 1978 thus demonstrated an attempt to step out of the architectural tradition and could be considered a culmination of parodic, non-institutional, and avant-garde aspects of the decade. Commenting on the minimalist break with normative modernist aesthetics, Hal Foster has outlined a distinction between the modernist category of quality and avant-garde...
strategy of interest (quoting Judd: “a work of art need only to be interesting”). He describes the replacement of quality with interest in the 1960s as a transgression of the measurable (good or bad) aesthetic tradition with the ill-fitting and experimental: “quality is a criterion of normative criticism, an encomium bestowed upon aesthetic refinement; interest is an avant-gardist term, often measured in terms of epistemological disruption.” The revolt of Lapin-Künnapu-Okas against the “overall seriousness” of the normative architectural institution could then be viewed in a similar context that rather redefines the context than refines the form and attempts to step out from the set frames. The exhibitionist house (Padrik) or the house on the metaphysical field (Künnapu) could not be explained with the vocabulary resulting from the preceding evolution in architecture, the key is rather to be found in the commentary on architectural means, production, and hierarchies. Thus it needs to be assessed through its social effect and intervention into the political sphere in a general sense (that was also why most interesting comments on the exhibition came from people in other disciplines). Yet there is at least one major divergence from Foster’s schema. When the aim of the avant-garde artists in the dissolution of institutionalism (erasing the border between art and life) is also a dissolution of the institution of the author as a professional who guarantees the sole meaning of the piece, the participants of the 1978 exhibition, and later, in Tallinn school, while staying anti-institutional, upheld their role as professionals (this is also indicated in the 1978 show in exhibiting photos of their built projects). The loss of authorship and anonymity had been difficult to accept for architects in industrialized building production. Thus in their design work the position of an autonomous creator with a personal handwriting was borrowed from the modernist art discourse and the architect as engineer was replaced with the architect as artist. In erasing the border between art and life, it was art that stood in the leading position and was made the model for life and lifestyle.

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2. Officially Socialist Realism remained the only properly Soviet art form till the end of 1980s: see ibid.
4. KANGILASKI, p. 225.
5. KANGILASKI, p. 220.
6. Ibid.
26–34, June 25, 1976–August 20, 1976. For Kantor the history of contemporary design starts with Soviet constructivism and Bauhaus functionalism. He differentiates between the “functionalism as style” that grew out from corporate design in the beginning of the century and “true functionalism” in Socialist design. The role of Soviet designers was to humanize society whereas in capitalist countries commercial mass design merely reifies society.

8. A comprehensive catalogue on the Tallinn School is Yhdeksän arkkitehtia Tallinnasta—Nine Architects from Tallinn. Helsinki, Suomen Rakennustatiteen Museo, 1984. The name to the group was given by the director of the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Markku Komonen.

9. It is interesting that the manifesto from 1972, “Program for the exhibition of new architecture,” which Lapin sees as a preparatory piece of the 1978 exhibition (signed by Lapin, Künnnapu, Avo-Himm Looveer, and Ülevi Eljand), states that in the drawings should all be 80 cm high, the length can be chosen freely by the participants. I thank Mari Laanemets for this information about the manifesto.

10. The initial M referred to his first name, Mart, Sadamm—referring to his last name, understood as in English, Port (in Estonian “sadam”). The years 1922–1979, the first being the year of his birth, indicate that he is to die next year. In reality, in 1979 he had to resign as head of the Union.

11. This is a quote attributed to Leonhard Lapin in a novel about life in Tallinn’s first industrially built new town Mustamäe. The architect of the area meets him casually at work and Lapin suggests him that to perfect the principles of modernist planning green areas between houses should be turned to graveyards. Mati Unt, Sügisball, Tallinn, Valgus, 1979, p. 121.


15. Ibid.


17. Mari Laanemets, op. cit.

18. Consciously or not, this effect was supported by the review of the exhibition in the main cultural weekly Sirp ja Vasar, where space was given to non-specialist writers from the arts and sciences but not to a single architect or critic, “Arhitektuurinäitus,” Sirp ja Vasar, 23, June 9, 1978.


21. Mari Laanemets has indicated this in an art context: Mari Laanemets, op. cit.

The article looks at the relationship between the Soviet architectural discourse and art discourse from the late 1950s onwards. In architecture modernism and industrialization became the official dictum; Stalinist decorativeness and the Beaux-Arts tradition, prevalent earlier in the decade, was condemned and a new technocratic approach to the built environment was embraced. In art, however, the Stalinist-Zhdanovist canon of Socialist Realism was the official model until almost the end of the Soviet Union and the oppositional modernist/abstract art was forced to remain unofficial. My focus is on a group of architects and designers in Estonia in the 1970s (Jüri Okas, Leonhard Lapin, Vilen Künnapu, and others) who operated simultaneously in the sphere of art and architecture. Thus we can look at the exchange between critical art practice and architectural production of this period, leading initially to an exhibition in 1978 in the Academy of Sciences library in Tallinn and the works of the Tallinn School in architecture in the early 1980s. Also, this practice could be seen as an attempt to displace the realism-abstractionism opposition in art as well as the art-technology debate (focused on the synthesis of arts) in architecture.

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