

**“The search for alternatives to prefab dormitory suburbs in Soviet Tallinn” by Mart Kalm**  
(Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn)

Since the reforms introduced by Khrushchev in the latter half of the 1950s, construction in the Soviet Union was required to follow standardised designs. Even buildings that were no longer industrially produced needed to meet these requirements. Thus, not only were blocks of flats built according to standardised designs, but also summer cottages; not only schools and kindergartens, but also cinemas and cultural centres; not only office buildings, but also factories. This led to the conviction that standardised designs, as a form of extreme economising, was created by the system to deliberately make people's lives more inconvenient and impoverish the environment. Standardised designs were automatically considered ugly and inefficient, and it was believed that only custom-designed buildings could be beautiful. After the collapse of the USSR, when architectural historians started talking about standardised designs as a phenomenon of the Age of Enlightenment that was meant to share the best experience and help those with a lower level of education, the Estonian architectural community were shocked. It was admitted only very reluctantly that Soviet standardised designs were in certain respects more professional than the solutions by contemporary speculative residential developers.

Due to the voluminous output of the housing construction plants during the Soviet era, all attempts to find alternatives remained relatively marginal, and buildings constructed according to these designs still constitute only a tiny part of the overall building stock of the time.

After the war, people were allowed to build

small family houses, the bulk of which were also constructed according to standardised designs. Because the state was not particularly successful in organising the official construction of residential buildings, it seemed reasonable to include people's own finances and labour in the creation of residential space. The fact that the reproduction of individualism by means of private houses was in ideological opposition to building communism, proved to be less important than the benefit brought by the creation of new dwellings. The construction of private houses flourished until 1963, when it was banned in larger cities as an insufficiently effective or economic way of creating residential space.

Establishing housing cooperatives was encouraged as a replacement for the construction of private houses using people's own savings. While rental payments for state-provided flats were symbolic, so that living there was basically free of charge, building a cooperative flat was a rather expensive undertaking. Members of the cooperatives included those who had not received a flat via the general waiting list, as well as those who sought a better flat and were willing to pay for it. As cooperative flats were highly-valued property for their residents, all such houses were rather well maintained, with front doors always locked and sometimes even flower beds next to the blocks. The residents of these houses were referred to as 'decent people'. However, in architectural terms, cooperative houses were divided into two categories. Most of them were ordinary prefabricated houses in new city districts. This means that the benefits received for the money

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spent were rather limited, and these houses could be seen rather as tactical efforts on the part of the state to elicit money from its citizens to make up for its own failures.

The other type of cooperative house was constructed according to a custom design, and mostly fitted into unfinished quarters in the city centres where prefabricated housing could not be built. (1) Although these cooperative houses were not designed by top architects, they generally contained more spacious dwellings, some of which were five-room flats of up to 100 square meters. They often included a dining area next to the kitchen separated from the lounge only by a sliding screen. Bathrooms and toilets were fully tiled; there were stone tiles in the hallway and wooden parquet in the rooms, as well as the potential to build a fireplace. Kitchen equipment included an electric stove, which was considered cleaner than gas. Sometimes there was a garage in the basement and a Finnish sauna for communal use. Nowadays, these differences seem so small, but during the Soviet era they constituted a source of infinite envy. There were approximately twenty such blocks constructed in Tallinn, and they were mostly inhabited by the technical intelligentsia. Many of those housing cooperatives were established within the institutions of the Construction Committee system, especially in architectural design institutes that had all the know-how for constructing such exceptional buildings. The residents in these houses were predominantly Estonian. These days it may seem nationalistic to place such emphasis on this, but we should not forget that in the stressful

atmosphere caused by Soviet occupation it was considered an enormous asset if all the residents living in a single stairwell were Estonian.



*Architect Udo Ivask. Apartment building 4a Kreutzwaldi St., Tallinn, 1963-66. Housing cooperative of the employees of the state design institute “Kommunaalprojekt”.*

The party nomenclature did not wish to reside in elitist cooperative houses, because the conveniences there came at a high price. They preferred to obtain similar conditions without paying for them. The strategy used by the party leadership to differentiate themselves mostly meant dwelling in bourgeois flats from the 1930s, which constituted the best of the housing stock in terms of quality. Villas as places of residence were avoided because such a display of luxury would have made them too vulnerable to attacks from their rivals. However, the Property Management of the Council of Ministers also built some state-provided houses for the nomenclature. The rental sums were symbolic, but the location and the architecture as well as the level of conveniences

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in those houses were equivalent to the standards in custom-designed cooperative houses. (2)

While these were the tactics adopted for adjusting to the situation, both the State Architectural Design Institute, Eesti Projekt, and the State Scientific Institute of Building Research in Tallinn were engaged in designing experimental apartment housing at the beginning of the 1960s. The aim of this research was to find an alternative to the emerging system of housing construction plants. One of the residential blocks designed by the scientists of the Building Institute was even finished in Tallinn city centre. (3) The resulting block of flats, with transverse load-bearing walls and warm air heating, sought to elaborate the floor plan of the prevalent standardised project 1-317, so that each family member could have a separate bedroom. Unfortunately, the allegedly original floor plan was copied from a house designed by Esko Korhonen in Hertoniemi district, Helsinki (1955–56). (4)



Architects Harald Arman, Alar Kotli, Ants Mellik & Heino Parmas. Experimental apartment building, 18 Gonsiori St. Tallinn, 1961-63.

The flexible experimental series of prefabricated houses developed by Eesti Projekt aimed at lengthening the life-cycle of houses, so that in twenty years' time, when the space norms for each person would be considerably greater in the wealthy conditions to be brought about by the realisation of communism, flats could be rearranged to create larger residential spaces. This reflects the naive belief in the revolution of science and technology characteristic of the early 1960s. In reality, no one was planning to rely on such experiments because the housing construction plant continued its slow yet steady fulfilling of five-year plans.

The sharpest critique of Soviet mass residential construction was delivered by a circle of young and furious architects in the 1970s, who established an avant-garde group, the 'Tallinn 10'. (5) Branding Soviet architects as the slaves of engineers, they idealised the 1930s Estonian functionalists and their work, as well as the artistic facets of architecture. Thus, they related to the post-1968 critique of Modernism in the Western world (Superstudio and others) and arrived, in effect, at Post-Modernism by the late 1970s. Their critique prepared the ground for one of the most powerful people's movements of perestroika, and the Estonian Singing Revolution as its local equivalent: this called for a halt to the development of the Lasnamäe district that provided accommodation to Russian-speaking immigrants. The song 'Peatage Lasnamäe' (Stop Lasnamäe), written by Alo Mattisen and performed by Ivo Linna, became one of the biggest Estonian hit songs of the late 1980s. (6)

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Regardless of the critique against mass residential construction and the attempts to circumvent its bulldozers, prefabricated housing constructed during that time still remains one of the most striking aspects of the legacy of the Soviet era in Estonia. In rare cases in recent decades such blocks have been demolished, but most of the Soviet residential districts still survive. The houses are gradually being refurbished, with some success, to provide accommodation for less wealthy social groups, such as pensioners, students, Russian-speaking communities and, in the case of Tallinn, recent immigrants from the rest of Estonia.

seum, Tallinn, 2008.

6:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kofam1MpX9U> (page last visited on 01.09.2011). On YouTube, the song continues to irritate the current Russian community in Estonia, and provokes heated discussions in the comments section.

## NOTES

1: E Lankots, *Klassideta ühiskond kõverpeeglis. Nomenklatuuri kortermajad Tallinnas 1945-1985*. Eesti Kunstiakadeemia magistritöö. Tallinn, 2005, 44-65.

2: E Lankots, 'Klassid klassideta ühiskonnas. Elitaarne ruumimudel Eesti NSV-s ja nomenklatuursed korterelamud Tallinnas 1945-1955', *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi*, 2004, vol 2, 11- 41.

3: L Volkov, 'Elamute eksperimentaalprojekteerimisest Eesti NSV TA Ehituse ja Ehitusmaterjalide Instituudis', *Elamuehituse küsimusi Eesti NSV-s*. Artiklite kogumik, Tallinn, 1960, 91-110.

4: H-J Becker and W Schlote, *Neuer Wohnbau in Finnland. New Housing in Finland*, Stuttgart, Karl Krämer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1964, 124.

5: A Kurg and M Laanemets (eds), *Keskkonnad, projektid, kontseptsioonid. Tallinna kooli arhitektid 1972-1985*. Environment, Projects, Concepts. Architects of the Tallinn School 1972-1985, Eesti Arhitektuurimuu-