

TRANSFORMATIONS - The Written and the Built

*„Our common sense tells us that the things of this world barely exist,
that actual reality is only in our dreams“*

Charles Baudelaire (1821 - 1867)

This essay is a collection of thoughts concerning the spatial developments in Estonia, it's past and future. What interests me is how the written and the built are connected: both are aspects of culture that on the one hand analyse and reflect the transformations in society, but on the other hand also can generate and accelerate these changes. My point is that we are lacking a tradition, a culture even a discussion of the spatial in Estonia. To move closer to these, into these I am looking at our history, at the broader history of modernism and what has been expressed here lately about these matters.

THE SITUATION

Estonia's geopolitical situation has led the nation to numerous transformations throughout its history. Looking not so far back, we have fought twice for the freedom of our Republic. During the first we started the move to the city. During the present we have gone from the Soviet command economy to liberal market economy. All these transformations take place and at the same time are reflected in the built environment. Today when this latter capitalistic system seems in an internal crisis and also Estonia's latest building boom is over we have time again to think about our course of direction.

DO WE HAVE A VISION

Since the liberation from the bonds of peasant life our Western world has become a many-faceted, shattered place presenting its inhabitants every day with a multitude of choices. A free world – an endless journey of choosing what to buy, where to belong, who to be, where to live... **At least so it seems to us.** Wasn't this the ideal we cried for ever since the French Revolution or even further since our own peoples fights with bondage and the landlords? Somehow it feels like we complain a lot in Estonia. *“Is this the kind of Estonia we wanted?”* is a well-known phrase. But let's ask instead - *do we have a vision?* Which are the transformations we wish for and how can we make them occur?

SPATIAL VALUES

In this free world, for the survival of a people with only a million of its representatives, the choices of every individual seem crucial. Firstly of course it concerns the family – the birth rate and on the other side our choices in life that affect the death rate. The decisions we are interested in the context of this essay are the ones about where to live – in the hectic capital, in the suburbs, in the „calm“ countryside or as more and more young people decide – somewhere else in Europe or why not the world? ¹ If centuries ago bondage kept us at place

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Bondage

orjus, pärisorjus

in bondage

kõidikus, orjuses

here, what are the values that keep us from vagabondage today? Are there alternatives – something between bondage and vagabondage? What are the values that keep us here in our small cold country? Could the spatial qualities be part of these values? Do we lose something more besides the possibility to live in a culture that acts in our mother tongue when deciding not to return to our homeland?

THE WRITTEN

The culture we come from – our small nation – have always valued the world of the word – the linguistic reality. Even through times of slavery and occupation in poetry, literature and songs the forbidden freedom, the other reality has been created. Our old, quite extraordinarily small and difficult language, has been our get-away, our dream reality. Here we have continuity – a collective consciousness if you wish.

THE BUILT

Architects and urbanists deal with the built world. Estonia has never had a grand built reality. The Estonian farm yards are as far as we got when looking at the history of Great Estonian Architecture. There is no doubt they were well functioning and subtly set in the forests and calm landscape of our small country. When it comes to cities – the closest we got was maybe the fortresses – the strongholds of the ancient Estonian kings. The traces of the grandest can be found in the old towns of Tallinn once Koluva, Rakvere once Weizenberg, Paide once Weissenstein.

THE EUROPEAN

The Old Town of Tallinn itself - so much treasured as a historical site, even taken under UNESCO World Heritage protection – is this really a truly Estonian phenomenon? I would say it is rather an example of historical European trademanship in union – the remains of the Hanseatic Tallinn, then Reval. The Hanseatic League (*hanse* meant a group of men in the old German language) was a mercantile and political union of cities in North-Germany, Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Livland in the 13th – 17th centuries.

From Estonia the cities Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu and Viljandi were members of the Hanseatic League. This was quite a long and continuous period when these cities were developed according to a common interest – the Hanseatic trade. The remains of its built reality, the silhouette of Tallinn's old town represents us in many circumstances and no doubt it brings here a lot of visitors from near and far.

CULTURE OF INTERRUPTIONS

Since then the history of our culture – and the city life as its essence has been an endless tradition of changes and interruptions. No grand regime or plan has been fulfilled before the next one comes to take over. There is even a well-known Estonian legend that demonstrates how we fear the possible completion of our capital - Tallinn is according to the legend **a city**

Vagabondage

hulkurlus, hulkurielu

vagabondager

hulkur, hulkuja

In the dictionary bondage and vagabondage stand next to each other. The word vagabond comes from vaga: vague, free; bond: bound.
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=vagabond&searchmode=none>

that is never to be completed – because then comes The Old Man from the lake of Ülemiste – Ülemiste Vanake, and floods it. Doesn't it sound like something from the book *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino?

Toomas Tammi's article *City of Interruptions* in the Estonian Architectural Review (49/50 2008) deals with the general tendency of interruption in culture and its representations in the built environment.

*In principle, there is nothing new here. Georg Simmel wrote, around the turn of the century, in his essay "Conflict in Modern Culture", that not a single form is capable of catching, expressing or halting the constant flow and change of modern life. Not a single form can preserve itself in the constant change of modern life. Completion essentially means obsolescence. In architecture, a very capital-intensive undertaking, structures still have, for quite some time, been built as if for eternity.*²

BUILDING CULTURE

Tammi goes on to argue that still, in terms of culture different situations can be distinguished. In Italy it has culturally been practically impossible to demolish anything – alternatively there is a tradition of reconstruction and adding on to existing structures. (It brings again my mind to an example of this in the written – the invisible cities of the Italian Calvino that stretch itself over centuries of history of cities and thought.)

On the contrary the Anglo-American culture where purely economical principals and profitability periods rule the building culture, the existing is demolished and replaced with short-term boxes to last for a new period of profitability. Tammi's article seems to me a warning that Estonia has tended to choose the latter path for the past 15 years.

TRADITION

We can make a comparison here with the Netherlands, where the geographical condition (a low land and a high risk for floods) has forced people to think about the organization of space and cooperate on a stately level to control its development.

The Netherlands is spoken about as the good example – spatial questions are taken seriously there and its name has also become synonymous with urbanism, good architecture and design.

LACK OF TRADITION

Lately the Netherlands have been looked towards in the Estonian discussion on the theme, when it comes to their institution of the State Architect. We have seem to come to a point where we understand that our shallow knowledge and experience when dealing with space and the built environment is shattered between institutions and somewhere along the way the vision of its development has been lost – if there ever even was one beside the profits of the 10 years of building and economic boom. Also the historical- political conditions of Estonia described in the beginning show that we have no tradition of dealing with the built

² Tammi, Toomas (2008) **City of Interruptions**, Estonian Architectural Review 49/50
http://www.ehituskunst.ee/et/12/4950/toomas_tammi_katke

environment. Also now Tammi speaks about problems that really should concern us all, as we all live in this built environment, in a magazine read by a few hundred specialists.

Hence, to continue on our way of trying to understand what can lead to positive transformations in culture and the built environment we have to look abroad. Which are the categories discussed, the terms used and analysed and of course are there any conclusions that help us further?

URBAN MYTHS

Modernism is the philosophical framework which consists the discussion of urban life in the last centuries. Themes like *pace – the fast, the slow* and as a very human category *alienation* come up again and again in what is written about the built. *Identity* - the search for the traces of the self as Lieven Ameel³ puts it. All these categories have to do with the choices having to be made that were mentioned in the beginning of the essay. I would like to call them modernistic urban myths.

THE URBAN AND MODERNISM

Let us investigate the existence of *the slow* and its contrary *the fast* in the urban context more precisely looking at it from a modernistic point of view. In architecture and urban planning we deal constantly with and research living in the city – urbanism as category – the problems and benefits connected with it. *The slow* has in the history of thought been more connected to the country life. Urban life has throughout the times been blamed for *the fast – the hectic – the nervous*. These themes appear clearly when modernism as a view of the world is being formed.

“THE METROPOLIS AND MENTAL LIFE”

Georg Simmel, a sociologist who we also quoted earlier in the essay, was one of the first to conclude and present modernism as the background of urban life.

Already at the beginning of the 20th century his masterpiece "*The Metropolis and Mental Life*"⁴ deals in a concrete and categorising way (so characteristic to German philosophy) through a clear cause and effect method with how the city as an organism works and effects its citizens minds and behaviour. An inseparable part in this picture is production and the monetary. The second category is even more evident and thoroughly considered and this has to deal with the hectic pace of urban life – the multitude and quick changes of impressions and sense data that the human mind is subject to in the city. When this article was published it aroused a lot of criticism. It was a time when the idea of progress was still in force and city life was its quintessence – modern, pure, futuristic and freeing. The article consisted too much critical analysis of the city life for its time e.g. the use of the term *blasé* – marking a human condition or state of mind where the multitude of impressions has made the mind numb and

³Lieven Ameel - Belgian born literature researcher who deals with the City in Literature more precisely Finnish literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. His MA paper at Helsinki University is called „Searching for the traces of the self – Urban Space in Finnish Literature at the turn of the 20th century“

⁴[http://www.altruists.org/static/files/The%20Metropolis%20and%20Mental%20Life%20\(Georg%20Simmel\).htm](http://www.altruists.org/static/files/The%20Metropolis%20and%20Mental%20Life%20(Georg%20Simmel).htm)

dumb - incapable to any reaction. It is worth noticing that this was a time when only a few European cities outnumbered a million citizens and the car that then moved at quite a calm pace was a sight seldom to be seen. Already then Simmel described how the nervous life and hectic pace of the city and its monetary and profit-orientated character effects people in a way that when reading it now one thinks of metropolises such as Tokyo or New York a hundred years later. The later great importance and success of Simmel's essay in the urbanistic theory hence after comes possibly also from the fact that it is written not only from a critical point of view, but it is a sincere try to understand the urban life, a fascination and love towards it, not mere critique. The article ends with a likeable statement:

*Since such forces of life [metropolis as an actor on the human psyche] have grown into the roots and into the crown of the whole of the historical life in which we, in our fleeting existence, as a cell, belong only as a part, it is not our task either to accuse or to pardon, but only to understand.*⁵

“HOW THE CITY HURTS YOUR BRAIN AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT”

In the year 2009 we still aim to do the same. The way the city effects people is investigated in today's neurological and neuropsychological research. In the beginning of this year a friend of mine bearing in mind that I am to become a future city-planner as a new-year greeting sent me a fresh American article on the theme called „*How the city hurts your brain...And what you can do about it*“.⁶ It presents the latest research about the cooperation and mutual effects of the environment and the brain. The results apparently show that the city environment with its multitude of sense stimuli and experiences creates concentration disorders, makes people more likely to choose an unhealthy diet and the lack of nature increases the level of criminality, etc.

SYMPATHY FOR THE CITY

Simmel's essay from 1903 as well as the urban critical article from 2009 use the same dialectical method. They are not purely critical but rather try to analyse the good and bad sides and don't take side or accuse.

We already mentioned the soft, non partaking ending of Simmel's essay. Our contemporary article ends with a statement that besides the formerly presented critique, the cities and their intensity are also the focal points of intellectual life and engines of innovation. That which Simmel described relying on sensible observations, thoughts and analysis, the 21st century article tries to view as scientifically proven:

Recent research by scientists at the Santa Fe Institute used a set of complex mathematical algorithms to demonstrate that the very same urban features that trigger lapses in attention

⁵ Simmel, Georg (1903) Metropolis and Mental Life
[http://www.altruists.org/static/files/The%20Metropolis%20and%20Mental%20Life%20\(Georg%20Simmel\).htm](http://www.altruists.org/static/files/The%20Metropolis%20and%20Mental%20Life%20(Georg%20Simmel).htm)

⁶ Lehrer, Jonah (2009) How the City Hurts Your Brain and What You Can Do about It
http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/01/04/how_the_city_hurts_your_brain/?page=full

*and memory -- the crowded streets, the crushing density of people – also correlate with measures of innovation, as strangers interact with one another in unpredictable ways. It is the "concentration of social interactions" that is largely responsible for urban creativity, according to the scientists. The density of 18th-century London may have triggered outbreaks of disease, but it also led to intellectual breakthroughs, just as the density of Cambridge -- one of the densest cities in America -- contributes to its success as a creative center. One corollary of this research is that less dense urban areas, like Phoenix, may, over time, generate less innovation.*⁷

WE NEED THE DISCUSSION!

The original sender of the American urban critical article to my friend was the President of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves. I conclude from this that the theme of the article, the principals and effects of urban life really concern people on a broad scale. We need this discussion! Also and especially among our people who have a clear danger to become extinct. And as a fact at least half of us here in Estonia live in a so-called urban environment. Probably urban life has interested people as long as cities have existed. And elsewhere as discussed earlier, this is far longer than here in our forest-full land. The pace and effect of urban life has been researched for centuries. The history of modernism – the quintessence of urban condition – is quite long.

“ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS INTO AIR”

Marshall Berman, (born 1940) in his 80s book „All That Is Solid Melts Into Air“ summed up modernism as a cultural, civic phenomenon. Berman drew attention to the transformation of the ideals of modernism through three-four centuries and called for a return to and reevaluation of the 19th century direction in the 21 century. He criticizes Marcuse’s and Foucault’s theories of the modern man as being seemingly free but truly imprisoned by the powers.

He goes back in history and views the springs of modernism in the work of Rousseau (1712-1778). Apparently his was the first to use the word *moderniste* in a sense that was omitted to it later in the 19th and 20th centuries generally. Rousseau described modern life in Paris as a whirlwind - *le tourbillon social*:

I’m beginning to feel the drunkenness that this agitated, tumultuous life plunges you into. With such a multitude of objects passing before my eyes, I’m getting dizzy. Of all the things that strike me, there is none that holds my heart, yet all of them together disturb my feelings, so that I forget what I am and who I belong to.

Berman moves further to Goethe and the romanticists and from there to his own favourite, Marx whose quote *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* makes a good title for the book. Next he deals more thoroughly with what happened to the ideas of modernism during the 20 century, especially from the 1960s onwards. From here he divides the development of modernism into

⁷ Lehrer, Jonah (2009) How the City Hurts Your Brain and What You Can Do about It http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/01/04/how_the_city_hurts_your_brain/?page=full

three directions: 1. The ones that strive to withdraw from modern life, concentrating instead on „pure art“: Roland Barthes, Clement Greenberg etc. 2. Negative modernism – the never-ending revolution, a tradition of overthrowing tradition“: Tatlin, Corbusier etc. 3. Positive or affirmative modernism: John Cage, Susan Sontag, Robert Venturi etc (they called themselves *postmodernists* but this is a different story).

Berman has critical points on all of the directions, the main point common for all being too separated from the real life. He calls for a return to the dynamic and dialectic modernism of the 19th century, for attention on what the real modern meant (which was lost in the XX century), for broadening the horizons of modernity.

*To be modern, I said, is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.*⁸

LACK OF A POSITIVE PROGRAMME

During my academic life and also of purely personal interest I have read quite a few western philosophers. Also the ones criticized by Berman. Often have I realised that the basic principles and ways of the world or more precisely the theme discussed is being analysed and described with fancy linguistic constructions. Still something seems to be missing and the reader is left questioning. It has been the same when dealing with these modernists and the categories of urbanism – *the slow, the fast* and *alienation* so often described in modernistic literature and to be found in connection with the being and pace of urban life. Let us look at the third – alienation - before going on with the missing positive programme.

ALIENATION

Simmel's explanation to the alienating effect of the city was that in the city a person has so many contacts with others, that as a sort of a defensive reaction the citizen takes a position of alienating oneself from the others. Another theory about alienation, that has caught my ear somewhere states that the feeling of alienation is somehow part of being human – the existentialist feeling of „every man is an island“ and in the urban context this feeling echoes in everyone amplified in its multitude – it is even more lonely to feel alone amidst thousands.

In the above mentioned modernist texts from sociology, philosophy or psychology as well as fictional literature from the same period (from Rousseau in the beginning of the 18th century onwards) there can be found numerous descriptions of people from the countryside moving to the city. They are feeling dizzy from the pace of the urban life and its machine-like life, they are strangers among strangers, alone and without roots. Sometimes one feels like it is a never-

⁸ Berman, Marshall, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, The Experience of Modernity*, Verso Ninth edition, Pages 345-346

ending lament! The only positive programme that comes to my mind which concerns these categories is the possibility to strive around in the town as a *flanèur*.

BECOME ONE WITH THE CITY

Being a *flanèur* you can both stop the time, lose the negative hectic and enjoy the impersonality – you become one with the city pace and multitude. Maybe this concept has what I am searching for – trying to understand – become one with what you are doing and hence create a state where the mind is transformed and hereafter the space!

CHANGING THE MIND

In buddhist thought which appeals to me personally there is a theory of the emptiness - *sunyata* – a condition from which all possibilities arise. The positive programme connected with this has been named *lysiologia* (*gr. the teaching of liberation*) by the Estonian translator and researcher of eastern thought Linnart Mäll as. It marks stages in a teaching where the point is to transform the mind, to move to the next level. The concept states three levels, where the base level is to be overcome and it is opposed to the final level which is to be reached, and the way between them is a sequence of methods following one another.

DISCUSSING, UNDERSTANDING, TRANSFORMING

The goal of these transformations is liberation through understanding. In our context through learning to live in the city, we can start to all create a better one, to be one with it. The method on this way of transformation has to be forming a vocabulary and creating a discussion that could lead to understanding and transformation for the better. Indrek Rünkla discusses this in a serious yet at the same time almost poetic manner in his article „*Avaliku ruumi asjus*“ (*engl. Concerning Public Space*):

*Kutsun üles mõtlema avaliku ruumi keskselt, kutsun üles sellest rääkima kõiki, kellel midagi öelda on. Kutsun üles mõtlema neid, kellel midagi öelda ei ole. Rääkige ruumist oma lastega ja oma vanematega, oma sõpradega, oma õpilaste ja õpetajatega. Nii võib meil tekkida programm, mida me lõpuks saame ka koolis õpetada. Nii võib tekkida see ühiskond, kes suudab avaliku ruumi keskselt mõelda ja tegutseda. Nii võib lõpuks meie lastelaste juurde jõuda ka see kaasaegne või ehk süasaegne avalik ruum ise oma paremates ilmingutes kui need, milleks oleme praegu suutelised.*⁹

Jonah Lehrer's American article offers a third way or a solution for their specific problem stated earlier in the article:

„The key, then, is to find ways to mitigate the psychological damage of the metropolis while still preserving its unique benefits. Kuo, for instance, describes herself as "not a nature person," but has learned to seek out more natural settings: The woods have become

⁹Indrek Rünkla, „Avaliku ruumi asjus“, Sirp 14.12.2007 <http://www.arhitektuuriaasta.ee/page/artikkel/id/7>

a kind of medicine. As a result, she's better able to cope with the stresses of city life, while still enjoying its many pleasures and benefits. Because there always comes a time, as Lou Reed once sang, when a person wants to say: "I'm sick of the trees/take me to the city."

Like stated in the beginning of the essay there is no doubt that our world is many faceted and complex. Probably it does not tend to become more simplistic either. So it is clear we have to talk about it. It isn't easy, but we have no choice. Because only in understanding, transformations can start to occur. The crisis we are in can be seen as the crucial point zero – or emptiness where anything can potentially arise. It is easier said in writing than built, but it must be so that the written can transform the mind, which then can transform the built...

We come to a conclusion that if we do learn to live in the city, when we have created ourselves a vocabulary to deal with spatial questions and have started to discuss, to grasp and understand it these categories I wanted to call myths, really become that. At present we don't seem to be very good at city life and also the linguistic that could evolve around and prior to it, maybe due to our cultural inability when it comes to the spatial described above. As architect Andres Alver said at the conference "State As Our Home" in April 2009 – the Estonian thought has not come to the question „*how do we want to live*“ in terms of the spatial yet. When we have started to value space¹⁰ maybe we can see the emptiness in and the possible real transformations arising from such parallels as *the city – the fast, the countryside - the slow* and somehow automatically going with it *slow-good, fast-bad* or the other way around if you wish. **These categories seem to dominate** most of the modernistic and **present day poor discussion around space**. The first pairs belong to the field of sociology, the second ones with philosophy or even psychology.

THE DREAM AND THE REAL

Let's state that we all have a desire to be happy – the most important is the feeling that we can do it, we rule our lives and its pace. This human desire and right for freedom we started this essay with. I said myths about the former categories because I want to argue it is best if a person does not think about these categories, but becomes one with what she is doing, with her life and being. The psychologists use the term „flow“.

This can overcome the barrier between the dream and the real, if I may, lift the veil off the mirage – the *maya* - from here the mind can start to transform and hereafter also the space perhaps. To illustrate it a quote by the young Estonian philosopher Anti Saar. He describes this phenomenon or feeling of the „flow“ in an essay called *Jubamõeldu* (dealing with another interesting phenomenon – the *deja vù*):

*Kes poleks peenramaad kaevates kogenu, kuidas väsimuse möödudes korraga kange väsimatus peale tuleb, nii et korraga ei kaevata enam peenart, vaid kaevamist ennast – kasvõi lõpmatuseni.*¹¹

¹⁰ which we at present don't as Alver argues in his article *Space and Value* in MAJA 1-2009

¹¹ Saar, Anti (2008) *Jubamõeldu*

Living it, experiencing it, being it. Human being. Questioning it, rethinking it. Breaking it down and building it up. We must keep digging and looking for transformations.

Summing it up – tying it up - coming back to the free world – like stated in the very beginning of the essay – we do have choices to make. So let us choose to live the city – to experience it. Like now, in the spring, leave the car at home, take the bike. Do things slower, but experience the more. Walk. Feel the weather. Take the kids to the park, sit down for a minute. Don't buy the first thing that awakens Your desires through fancy advertising; think about Your real needs. Step off the escalator, the moving staircase leading to nowhere. Live the city, write it, read it, transform it.

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