

WHO IS AN URBANIST?



Audience. In the foreground prof. Panu Lehtovuori. Photo: Kadri Vahter

## URBAN STUDIES OF THE PERIPHERY: 9 years of urban studies in the Estonian Academy of Arts

From the 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2013 EKA G hosted an exhibition demonstrating student work from the 9 years of urban studies program in the Estonian Academy of Arts. As part of the exhibition U invited together a discussion group. Here we publish part of the debate and give a word to the former professor in charge of the program, Panu Lehtovuori and the current professor in charge, Maroš Krivy. They discuss the main achievements and future plans, and pose the question, how to benefit from being in the "periphery"?

*U: It has been nine years since the start of the urban studies program in the Estonian Academy of Arts and the biggest course works are exhibited here. Today we would like to talk about the nine future years of urban studies in Estonia. So what will happen to the program, what is the position of an urbanist in Estonian society? Why is there an urban studies program in Estonia and what have been the main achievements of the first nine years?*

**Panu Lehtovuori** (the previous professor in charge, later Panu – eds.):

Thanks for the invitation and thanks for organising this overview, I realise that I remember it quite well actually. So, why did we start this program about 10 years ago in Tallinn? I guess you all know, but if there is someone who doesn't, then it was initiated by **Jan Verwijnen** who was running the program

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of spatial design in the University of Art and Design in Helsinki. He had also worked for Rem Koolhaas and was educated in ETH in Zürich, Switzerland before that. Basically the mission of Jan was to bring the so called second urban planning to Nordic Countries. There is a certain tradition of urban analysis, a certain critical ethic of planning, which is quite different from the standard land use planning that is practised in the profession around here. And it comes from the late 1950s, early 60s Italian typomorphological tradition – Aldo Rossi, the person who made this typomorphological approach popular, was also a teacher of Jan in Zürich in the 1970s. So, there is this historical link which then resulted in quite an interesting program in Helsinki in the 1990s. Jan was a very active person, he brought that tradition and actually started to educate interior architects to become interested in urban design – to move from interior space also to exterior space and to have a broad analytical view. Then in the late 1990s early 2000s he started a completely new program in Tallinn. But why was Jan interested in Tallinn? This was because of me and other students in the year 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed and Estonia got its independence. We were doing work for the Venice biennial with a student group from Helsinki and we saw the news in an Italian newspaper and thought we have to go back to Finland because the Soviet Union will take over, but the history was different and we coupled with another student group from California, San Francisco, and we decided that this is the time when the change happens and we have to do something somewhere in the newly independent states, and the place turned out to be Estonia. The next summer in 1992 we organised a summer school in Pärnu. We invited Jan as tutor of this summer school as he was the most interesting, intelligent and open-minded educator we knew. So, there is this long history of personal contacts between people who were behind this critical view of architecture and planning.

So why? Obviously I told this story to explain that there are personal connections, there is chance and things are not always so planned. But of course both Jan and myself had a reason to start it, it was not an accident. I want to make two points regarding your question. We didn't start this program for Estonia. Scientific research and science is international, it's independent of nation states and it is really supposed to be like that. We wanted to see it in the international, and more specifically in the European context as an agenda to develop and rethink planning, to develop and re-think architecture and to connect to scientific research. In between this period, if we are looking from 1992 to today, the transdisciplinary field of urban studies has emerged. In 1992 nobody was talking about urban studies, it's a newer phenomenon. There has been an increasing interest to study urban processes, urban phenomena from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, and in Finland, accidentally or not, were people who were part of this kind of new wave introducing this notion of urban studies. We were thinking that changes taking place here in central Eastern Europe, in the Baltic area, would also make it a very fruitful place to look into the international emerging scientific discussion around how to study cities, what can we learn about cities and how to develop cities for the new century. **It's not for Estonia, but it is in Estonia for many good reasons.** First of all we thought that rapid change, which has been occurring here, is a very interesting study case, the Tallinn context, Estonian context, Baltic Context, central Eastern-European context is worth valorising internationally. And secondly, we thought it's also a very good place to study. We had good contacts with the Department of Architecture in the Estonian Academy of Arts, but also more broadly to the network of architects here in Estonia. At that time, in the 1990s and also till the 2000s, the profile of Estonian archi-

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ecture was much more open minded than in some other places, especially in Finland. Here architecture was international, intellectual, it was interested in concepts and this has been quite visible until today - people read here, they are interested in thinking. It's a very positive scene and we thought that there is potential for people coming in for academic and practical contacts.

***U: How essential is it that the urban studies program is in the department of architecture?***

Panu: That's almost impossible to answer. I think it could be in another place. It is not as such tied to the department of architecture necessarily. We have been thinking that, and playing with the idea of moving it to a different institutional context. It's not impossible.

The other question was what are the main achievements. Of course I'm the wrong person to answer that question, I'm completely biased. But if you want, then I can give some thoughts on of what I think is of good quality, or positive, or long lasting to some extent. One of the problems of the program is that nobody has graduated, it's only in the last year, 2012, that we had some non-Estonian students. But still, even though that's the case, the program has been quite an important connection point for people who are interested in topics around urban studies. The program was the first to put urban studies in the headlines and became some kind of contact point in itself, through students, through those who organised this exhibition, through people who have been teaching, through the many international guests. Of course there are many spin offs as well, for example, Linnalabor, the Spin unit by Damiano recently, and many, many similar spin offs. Also the other study programs in Tallinn and so on. Secondly I think that the Urban Studies Days, which we re-named Urban and Landscape Days, are a great tradition. It's an annual event, which has established itself on the Estonian and Baltic landscape. That's definitely an achievement. Now we are having the 10th Urban and Landscape Days this coming April, which is a full international conference<sup>1</sup>. Actually it is a high quality conference. I don't really want to go into too much detail in terms of the student work. We are dealing with links between theory and practice; there is interest in scientific research and educating students in that. But there's also interest in practical work. Students are finding solutions for real or semi-real problems and then creating links to other actors – to the city, to regions. It really shows that this kind of work can actually change how people think, it can change how professionals think about their own space.

***U: I think it's really interesting to see that urban studies, as well as the urban studies program, is an open field. But maybe we can ask from Maroš, what are your plans for the next nine years?***

**Maroš Krivy** (the professor in charge, later Maroš – eds.): Oh, I can't talk about nine years, because I don't know, I can talk about one year maybe. I can also talk about the present.

Just to comment on what Panu said, one of the questions is why is the program in Estonia? This is really a very good explanation that he gave, but it is not something that should be a fixed criteria. Another very relevant and important thing which is also being criticised with this

1. Read more about the ULD10 conference in review in current U by Pasquale Cancellara - eds.

View of the exhibition.  
Professor of Urban studies Maroš  
Krivy on the background.  
Photo: Kadri Vaher



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kind of interdisciplinarity, or I should even say indisciplinarity - that it's not clear what it is, that it mixes people from different backgrounds, or even makes you mix your own background. Often this is a disadvantage because people who have very clear professional identities, such as engineers or architects – they can pose the question: “Who are you?” But on the other side, I think, what I would like to do in the future is to actually feed these indefinite, unclear identities. On one side, perhaps we need to face this constant critique that you are not an expert because you don't fit into some kind of category. On the other side, this gives you a certain freedom to constantly question some of solutions that are taken for granted.

***U: So basically, you have an obligation to find your own place within the urban studies.***

**Maroš:** Yes, and actually, I don't know if I should open this debate now, but what is urban studies? It would be good to start debating it. I've been thinking over the last two days randomly about this old article, an interview by Andres Kurg. He interviewed Rob Shields, a professor of urban studies in Canada. He raised exactly that question in 2004 as an outsider: 'What is this urban studies?' And I think this is, if I'm not mistaken, in the Estonian language the program is called *urbanistika* what we could actually rather connect with *urbanism*. I think it has a slightly different connotation than urban studies.

Anyway, I think there are two tendencies – one is a more technically oriented strategic approach, technocratic planning, and the other one is, how it is understood in the Western context. I did my PhD in urban studies in Finland and clearly my personal interest here is how to bring together what I understood as urban studies from my studies and what is understood as urban studies here. I think here it's much more pragmatically oriented – that an urbanist is this professional who proposes this solution for the city, like a kind of a toolbox.

***U: So, our society is not ready for urban studies?***

**Maroš:** No, I am not really being conclusive here. I think it is really important to debate. Maybe now I can just raise this issue without making any final words that one thing is this idea that you have to always come up with a solution. Whereas the urban studies tradition which comes more from this neo-Marxist or Foucauldian perspective of the analysis of how power operates in society and space, it's motive is to be critical, to raise questions without always knowing what is the immediate solution. Obviously the question is to what extent these two approaches can be brought together and at what point they can no longer be brought together. Does it make sense?

***U: It seems that urban studies is a bit like a leech that sucks on to other professions, so now it is in the architecture department so it takes on architecture's philosophy which is coming out with a project or a solution.***

**Maroš:** There is a very important topic that Panu also mentioned: what does it mean to be international? Not just to say that we have some international students, or we don't have them, like this year, but also this idea **about how much could we be international in the periphery?** If you do urban studies in New York, nobody will ask you does it make sense to do urban studies in New York, yes? Because New York is not considered a locality, it is considered to be a place with global relevance. But here you constantly face this question. I think we should not be afraid of this, I'm just speculating, don't be afraid

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of being more secure, because there are ideas that are not necessarily peripheral and if you look at the East, there are so many examples that I can name... for example Prague Linguistic Circle or the Tartu School of Semiotics or Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis. We have small cities, small places where they formulate great ideas, great programs which then circulate globally. Especially now when we can download an article from the Internet and be in touch with people from around the world. Of course this personal context is important, I'm not trying to downplay the aspect of the periphery, I'm just saying that it should not be used as an argument for just looking here, and not globally.

***U: Does the student of urban studies have to only have an international perspective if you talk about the urban studies program being not for Estonia?***

**Maroš:** No, I didn't say it should not be... And if you look at what we did last year it's about Tallinn. It might be about Tallinn, but it might be about other cities in Europe. It's also about different scales. When you focus, you might focus on one street, on a district, on a city, on a region. This question of scale is a crucial thing. When we talk about urban space then it is becoming very important to talk about spatial scales. Even today, some people have proposed to stop talking about cities, but to talk about urban processes, or spatial processes that take place on different scales ranging from the street to a really global level. What happens when these processes that take place on different scales, global and local, meet with each other.

**Panu:** Can I just add, it is a good idea to actually gradually start to critically think about the notion of urban studies because it's time to clear our heads again, but – it might be good, it might not be good... This critique of the notion city is of course already age old. I really mean that it has really been there since the late 60s, maybe even from 40s.

**Maroš:** I mean the notion is still used.

**Panu:** It's still used for good reason, but it's one of the big debates that can fill libraries, yet the notion of urbanisation has not been criticized until now. Just now I was in contact with Mark Gottdiener who was also here in Tallinn teaching a few years ago. He is now looking at Toronto for example. It's a city region, quite extended and when we look at contemporary city regions actually even the notion of urbanisation becomes meaningless. It is increasingly difficult to actually define the meaning scientifically because the densities, the borders, the ways of organisation start to develop in a such a way that a meaning of some kind of agglomeration of people also becomes diffused. I seriously think that urban studies and serious interest in cities and urban processes is one of the most important study fields at the moment, because we are, as we all know, going through some kind of historic revolution. The way human societies organise themselves is changing and the scale of urban agglomeration is one part of that, but as said this scale of urban agglomeration is losing it's meaning. It's actually becoming an uninteresting topic. We should find new ways, maybe it should be more qualitative, or maybe we should be looking at the word small, or I don't know, finding a different way to conceptualise how our societies are changing, how our life is changing.

**... TO BE CONTINUED  
IN FOLLOWING U-s...**