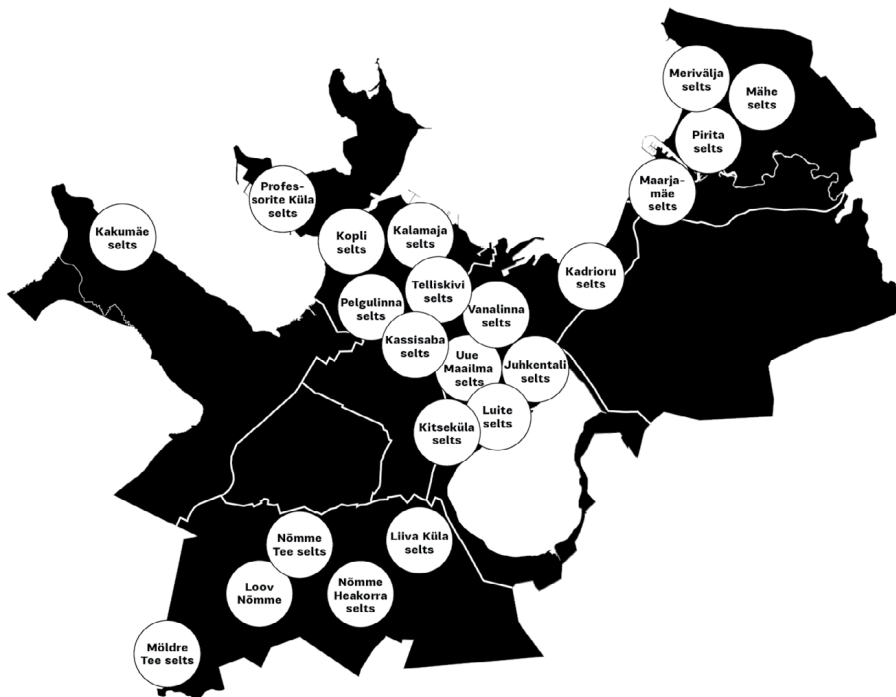


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THE ABC OF TALLINN'S NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATIONS

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THE NATURE OF (CAPITAL'S) NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATIONS

In Estonia, civil society refers to the self-initiated cooperation of people for the purpose of pursuing their interests, discussing public issues, and participating in decision-making processes, as well as the associations, networks and institutions which enable such cooperation.¹ One of the forms of civil activism and self-initiated cooperation are the neighbourhood associations that are usually NGOs operating in one geographical location.

As of November 2013, there are 22 neighbourhood associations in Tallinn. Associations have been formed in the City Centre, Northern Tallinn, Pirita, Nõmme and Haabersti districts. Their membership varies from a few dozen to several hundred people. The number of people interested in the associations' activities often considerably exceeds the number of official members.

In terms of nature of activity, the neighbourhood associations can be very different, depending on the environment of the city district and the interests of members. I will list examples of how neighbourhood associations have had a say in the development of Tallinn in the past 10 years:

Public space: the reconstruction of Soo Street in the Kalamaja neighbourhood, the initiative of Vana-Kalamaja Street, the Uus Maailm vision,

1. Hea Kodanik 2013: www.ngo.ee/kodaniku%C3%BChiskond?language=en

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the petition of the Pelgulinna Association for protecting the Stroomi forest, the court case started by the Pirita Association to revoke the detailed plan of the Pirita Yachting Centre to preserve Pirita's seaside as a recreational area;

Mobility and organisation of transport: the work of the Luite Association for preserving the Veerenni railway crossing, the work of the Möldre Road Association for improving bus connections, the successful work of the Liiva Village Association for directing heavy traffic away from Kalmistu Road;

Social services: the charity events for underprivileged families organised by the Kopli Association, active inclusion of senior citizens by the Pelgulinna Association;

Safety and maintenance: the communal work at the Professors' Village, communal work at the Juhkentali area, the activity of the Old Town Association for curtailing the noise levels of entertainment establishments;

Holding cultural events: the Maarjamäe Fair, the Street of Green Gates in Nõmme, the Day of Fun in the Professors' Village;

Valuing and redefining district identity: the History of Buildings project in Kadriorg, the activities of the Nõmme Maintenance Association;

Participation in the general development of the district, such as discussing the availability of kindergarten and school places or visions for the city's future and finding possible solutions: the vision conferences of the associations of Pirita, the series of forums run by the Telliskivi Association.

MISGIVINGS AND DOUBTS

Typically, the city rulers and developers often question the representativeness of neighbourhood associations. How many members does a neighbourhood association need to justify its participation in the development of the environment of a particular area? When a neighbourhood association is expressing an opinion, does it reflect the feelings of all residents of the area or merely those of a certain faction? How is the territory divided if there's an association of house owners and several housing co-ops also operating in the area? By what right does a neighbourhood association speak out about events in another neighbourhood or city district? Why do neighbourhood associations want to create a parallel structure next to the city district government's?

The workshops held this year on the initiative of Urban Idea (Linnaidee)² have tried to answer these questions and in defining the neighbourhood association, several conclusions have been made:

1) a neighbourhood association is not a representative assembly of the residents of the area, it is a (ideally one of many) citizens' association that focuses on improving the local living environment;

2) a neighbourhood association does not have to represent all residents of the area because that would contradict one of the founding principles of the associations (and democracy) – fostering diversity. There are several neighbourhood associations and other organisations in one area and when there are disagreements, making a decision to address diverse interests lies with the city government;

2. See www.linnaidee.ee/en/content/activities (workshop summaries available in Estonian at www.linnaidee.ee/content/koostoomudel).

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3) although the term 'neighbourhood association' has become a fixture in public vocabulary, most of the neighbourhood associations do not operate within the historical borders of districts set by the city, but instead determine their territory of activity themselves (a good example is the Telliskivi Association that cares for the well-being of the Pelgulinn and Kalamaja neighbourhoods). At the same time, local life is influenced by decisions that are made outside that particular area or affect the entire city, such as public transport, schools and kindergartens, and organisation of transport, which is why the neighbourhood associations bring a local perspective to these discussions and make suggestions for improving city-wide systems;

4) as the neighbourhood associations bring together people with very different interests, the decision-making tries to follow the principles of deliberative democracy, which means looking for a consensus or if that fails, to cater to different opinions in the best possible way;

5) a neighbourhood association does not wish to create a parallel governing structure, instead, it is willing to be a mediator between the neighbourhood and the city authorities, passing on information on the neighbourhood's needs and problems, that is to say, it strives for being an expert on local conditions.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

There's still a great deal to be done in terms of democracy within the neighbourhood associations, and the pace of the process follows the development of the society and the self-awareness of its citizens. The larger the footing of a neighbourhood association in the local area and further, the more frequent and substantial the communication with the authorities, the more contacts there are with the representatives of other active neighbourhoods, the greater is the need for writing plans of action for NGOs, competent public relations, supervising volunteers and obtaining finances. The greater the resonance and field of influence of the neighbourhood association, the greater the responsibility of the board of the association to ensure transparency and improve co-operation. As is the case with the lifespan of any NGO, the established neighbourhood associations will also eventually need operating subsidies. So far, no neighbourhood association of Tallinn has secured a fixed subsidy from the city or any civic society fund, although such need has been discussed in several neighbourhood associations.

In addition to protecting public interest, the neighbourhood associations could also include other parties in the improvement of the living environment (the following are suggestions from the neighbourhood association workshops): the neighbourhood association could be a partner for developers in creating visions for the future appearance of the neighbourhood to prevent possible future disagreements; the neighbourhood association could exchange information with apartment associations and communities and pass on contacts of local entrepreneurs; the neighbourhood association could offer local businesses an additional outlet for advertising (the local paper, website, etc.), additional earning opportunities at community events and help with shaping positions related to the business area.

Some of these points on development certainly apply also to the neighbourhood associations in other Estonian cities and towns: Tartu, Pärnu, Paide, and Rakvere.

NEXT PAGE IS A MAP AND TIMELINE OF TALLINN'S NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATIONS.

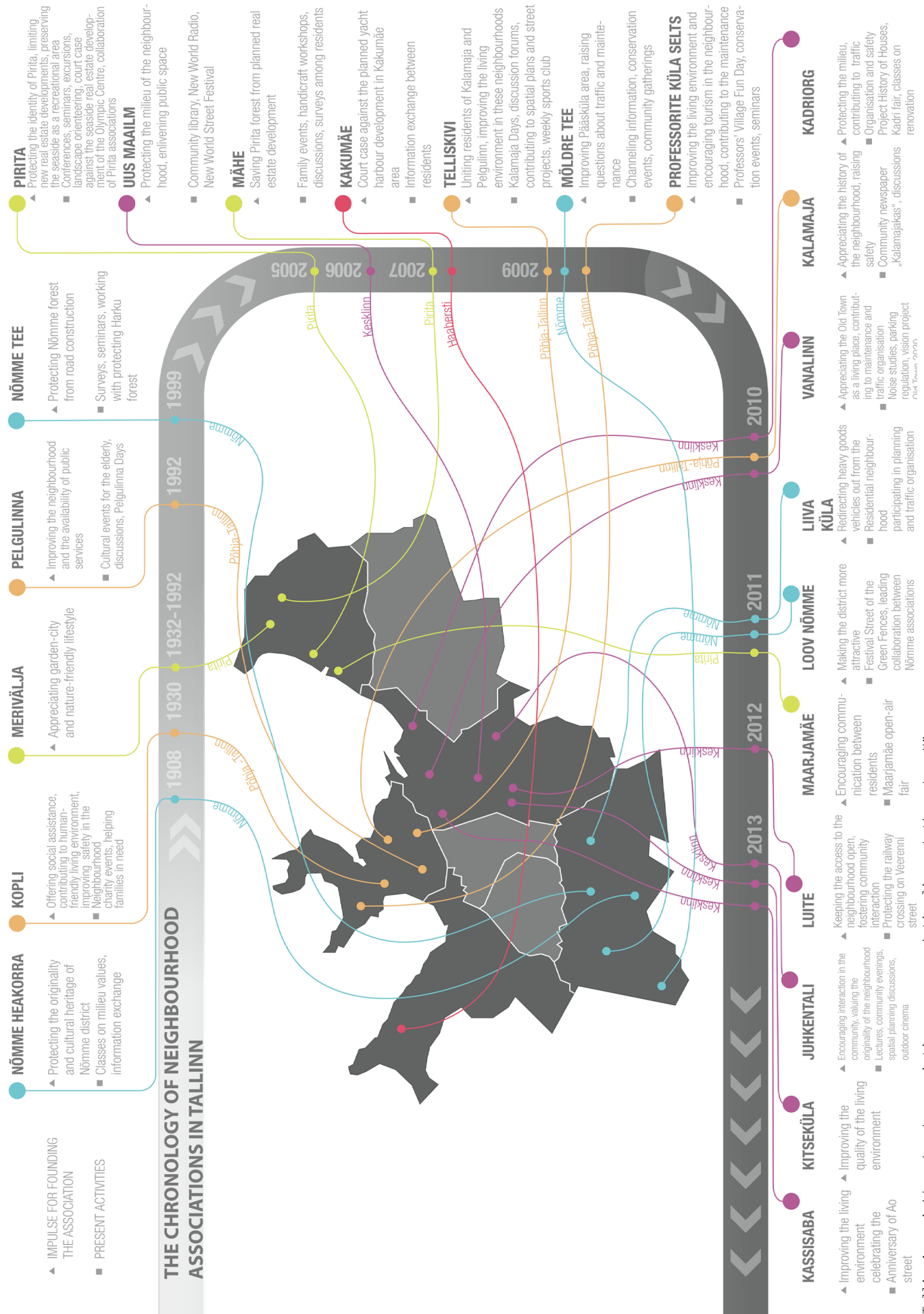
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* THE CONTACT DETAILS OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATIONS OF TALLINN ARE LISTED ON THE WEBSITE OF URBAN IDEA: www.linnaidee.ee/en/



Tallinn's neighbourhood associations: map and timeline. Author Anu Kõgu.