

*Photo: Kaisa Kaer*

## FAILED ARCHITECTURE: INVESTIGATING TROUBLED ARCHITECTURE

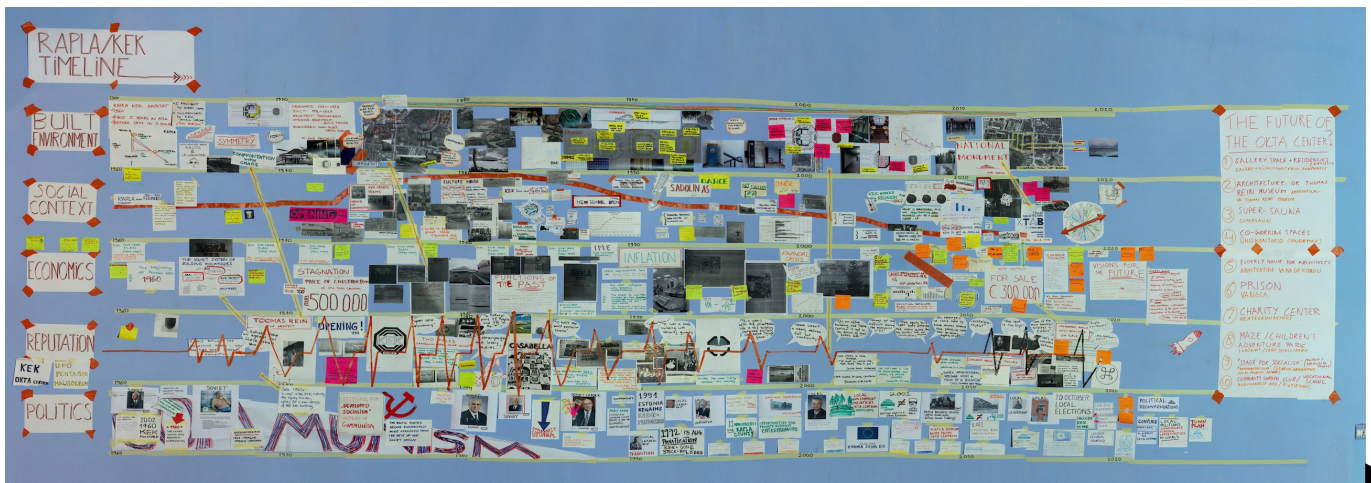
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Witnessing a time of crises, speculations, urban vacancy, and the inflation of the architectural profession while simultaneously seeing the increasing popularity of design websites that produce a continuous stream of non-critical, glossy renderings and idle marketing talk, Failed Architecture<sup>1</sup> believes there is a need for a more holistic approach. Architecture is an expression of the social, economic and political conditions of its time. Therefore, FA is more concerned with the context and underlying dynamics of a building than with its visual appearance.

Failed Architecture does not judge buildings, or tag them as a 'success' or 'failure'. Rather, by using the provocative title 'Failed Architecture', we aim to stimulate the questioning of what shapes our built environment. We investigate cases and developments that make us raise our eyebrows. Next to an ongoing online research, and live lectures and debates, FA conducts research workshops on site. On these workshops, our holistic, 360-observation comes to the fore. We find it important to examine architecture not (only) from an architectural discourse, because we see architecture as a cultural product and therefore the politics, economics and social influences are at least as important in the realisation and course of life of our living environments. The aim of the workshops is to understand the context and path-dependency of a particular building, neighbourhood or urban phenomena (i.e. vacancy, riots, speculation), which can be perceived to have a problematic relationship with their urban surroundings. Together with a group of participants, FA performs a multiple-day research that breaks down the history of a specific case. By analysing the built environment, the social context, the economics, the reputation and the politics – a physical timeline is created. The timeline shows the

1. [www.failedarchitecture.com](http://www.failedarchitecture.com)

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Timeline. Photo: Ingeel Vaikla

history of the case from various angles and continues into the near future, in order to sketch possible development scenarios. It also shows the relationship between the different actors and dynamics (for example how the social makeup influences the reputation, and how politics influence economic contexts that can in turn affect the life of a building). This does not only provide a valuable perspective on the specific research subject, but also trains the participants to examine spatial issues using a comprehensive approach.

The research is to a large extent carried out by the participants, with FA's guidance and input from a general pre-research perspective. Moreover, several experts are invited to give lectures during the workshop about a variety of topics that relate to the subject, from the building's architectural history and societal trends to cultural issues and economic developments. Next to this, participants conduct desk and archival research, interviews and field analysis.

The resulting timeline is a starting point for the debate about the challenges and constraints, but most of all the potential of the alleged problem – for the particular case study, but also similar developments on a wider scale. To date, FA has led workshops on various topics in several cities, including modernist housing estates in Berlin, Nottingham and Copenhagen, 19<sup>th</sup>-century dilapidated neighbourhoods in Porto and Belgrade, obsolete and unloved office blocks in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, and relics from socialist times in Sofia and Budapest.

## RAPLA KEK: HIBERNATING THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES

One of our latest research workshops was carried out during the Tallinn Architecture Biennale 2013. Together with local partners b210 and Linnalabor, we picked a case that is typical for Estonia in terms of its architectural heritage, political-societal history and the current (re)valuation of Soviet architecture. Over twenty participants from a variety of backgrounds (architecture, urban studies, photography, sound, economics, etc.) worked non-stop for five days on the analysis of the KEK-building in Rapla, originally built as the administrative building for a collective building organisation for collective farms (Kolkhozes). Rapla KEK gained immediate fame as an iconic piece of modernist Soviet architecture and is well-known amongst Estonians and abroad, and recently has gained extra attention in the current wave of rediscovery and revaluation of the architecture from Soviet times. The 1980s were its heydays, business was thriving and the KEK-building functioned as a bustling

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Photo: Ingeel Vaikla



Photo: Kaisa Kaer

community hub. However, the building has been struggling with new realities in terms of finding users, physical decay, adapting its rigid structure to changing fashions, competing with other commercial, community and sports facilities, and creating a viable business model.

The fact that the participants and FA were able to spend four nights in the KEK-building, contributed to the analysis and experience of the building.

After a general introduction by FA about the methodology and by Kaur Sarv from Linnalabor about the building, we toured around the area to get an understanding of the spatial setup of these kind of environments that were constructed throughout Estonia, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s. We also met with the local municipality and county government to talk about the plans for the district and the role of the KEK-building, which turned out to be indistinct, not to say burdensome because of its upcoming status as a national monument; while the city and county cannot directly influence the future of the now privately owned building. Other stakeholders and experts that contributed to the research were the curator/researcher from the Museum of Estonian Architecture, the director of the Estonian Centre of Architecture, the head of the Rural Affairs Department of the Estonian Ministry of Agriculture, the former mayor of Rapla, former KEK-employees and local cultural and business representatives.

The workshop participants dove into the history of the building and its social, political and economic context. The FA-methodology proved to be a useful tool to place it all in perspective; extract valuable information and relations between contexts, trends and important moments. This resulted in a timeline that represented the reconstructed stories, broader developments and events that have influenced the fate of the building.

Despite all of its current problems, the building still has a strong identity because of its distinct design and its place in the collective memory, room for alternative use and the possibility to tap into new socioeconomic developments and EU funding streams.

*\* SHORTLY AFTER THE WORKSHOP, IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT THE BUILDING WAS SOLD TO NEW OWNERS, WHO ALLEGEDLY ARE AIMING TO REALISE (GUEST) APARTMENTS AND MAINTAIN THE SPORTS HALL FOR BASKETBALL ACTIVITIES.*