



Exhibition view. Vello Asi on the foreground.  
Photo: Henno Luts

## TAKING AN ARCHIVE TO AN EXHIBITION, WITHOUT WUNDERLICH

In late November of 2015, the exhibition *Expedition Wunderlich: 11 interior architects* opened at the Museum of Estonian Architecture. The exhibition used an experimental form to introduce interior architects who began their careers in last century, showing their working principles and works from their student days. Since the story of the exhibition is closely linked to the reopening and rediscovery of the archives of the Estonian Academy of Arts' (EAA) Department of Interior Architecture, the editors of *U* talked about what has been found and experienced and about the exhibition itself with the leaders of the process. This interview is with Carl-Dag Lige of the Museum of Estonian Architecture, the exhibition curator, and professor Hannes Praks, the head of EAA's Department of Interior Architecture.

**Andra Aaloe:** Lets start from the very beginning: how was the idea conceived to make an exhibition like that?

**Carl-Dag Lige:** The idea for the entire exhibition began a bit further back. When Hannes [Praks] was running for the position of the head of department, I helped him formulate his programme. Once Hannes had been working in his new position for some time, I asked him whether the department would like to present this new energetic beginning to the wider public in the format of an exhibition. The basement hall of the Museum of Estonian Architecture was a challenge because it is a difficult space: arches, intense character, etc. And so we gradually started thinking from there. We mostly followed our intuition and emotions. I didn't want it to happen where I would come and make an exhibition about the department; instead, I wanted to make it with the department. The working process was stalled at one point because Hannes hoped I would tell him what the specific concept was but I refused that role... The same archive space – a tiny ten square metre room in the Interior Architecture department that was used also to store vacuum cleaners and junk – was crammed with works. It was obvious that at different times, a different amount of attention was paid to the archive (though not much in the last twenty years – more recent stuff had just been thrown in a heap). This is where the base of the exhibition came from – archival material to further work with.

**Andra:** In its form, the exhibition is like a walk in the woods; each time you hear, see, and notice different things, and different elements are manifested. In general, I got a feeling of certain unfinishedness; that I will never know everything these people have to say because I cannot hear them very well, and I am running out of time as it is open only for one hour in a day. But this feeling is certainly not negative; instead, for me, it expresses the fact that the exhibition – the story of teaching interior architecture at EAA and/or the role and work of the people presented – is something considerably broader than you can initially grasp. Was this format intentional or did it just happen?

**Hannes Praks:** We arrived at this exhibition and way of exhibiting in a half-subconscious way, selecting and contemplating various options and themes as a team. Initially, we were thinking of making this exhibition about the current Department of Interior Architecture, but then it seemed that the most recent layer (that I have been part of for over a year) is too thin, so we decided to let it settle for a bit. But since the students did dive into the archive at first and immediately began bringing out

treasures, it seemed that this mineral deposit was enough for exhibiting. I have said on several occasions that this is just the beginning – this is an introductory event, and we want to add also an online environment or perhaps make a few more exhibitions on the subject.

**Keiti Kljavin:** How did the decision to focus on people come about?

**Hannes:** For me, it all began when Carl-Dag made an exhibition for their provisional examination with students, who had as one course a traineeship in the archive. The students put works from the archive up on the walls and we analysed the interiors of villas from the 1960s, etc., and they seemed to have a special human touch. They were minimalistic, but not frosty – they were warmly minimalistic. The approach to material and form was very much centred on the human, and it was very fresh – these themes are extremely relevant today, too. This review kicked off the idea of focusing on the human. From there, we started visiting our research subjects, who told their personal memories, for example how they communicated with people when they were studying. These were very inspiring and exhausting outings.

**Carl-Dag:** Yes, it lasted for two intense weeks.

**Hannes:** Every conversation took place in someone's home and took about 2–3 hours. And driving back in the EAA van and discussing what we had heard and experienced was just as exciting – like a seminar in an EAA van. The students who happened to be in that expedition's working group got a very good schooling almost by chance.

**Andra:** What was the role of the students in the planning and designing of the exhibition?

**Carl-Dag:** The students helped us work through the archives in the course of their archive traineeship. And in the final examination of this subject, works selected by students emerged and they also wrote papers on specific people. Certain themes stayed in our minds from that examination and the students were always our partners in discussions. I, however, made the final selection of works.

**Hannes:** The design was also co-operative. Even when a student thought that a cindered plank did not fit in the exhibition – that it was not dignified enough for presenting the greats – it conversely inspired us to use it anyway. I guess we had votes, though everything was not totally democratic. There were different impulses at the design meetings and it was my job to integrate them.

**Keiti:** Speaking of people: could the students' relationship to their chosen archival subject – they were wearing smocks with name tags, as if to embody the person

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whose works they were showing to the visitors – have been more playful, i.e. more personal?

**Hannes:** I haven't even considered that one student should go around and present the works of one interior architect. (**Carl-Dag:** It's more common that they have switched.) But today I also went to 'work' there for the first time and began choosing a smock: Bruno Tomberg, Leila Pärtelpoeg – no, no, I can't, no. For example, I could never have chosen Vello Asi – I have too much respect for him. It was easier with Pille Lausmäe because I know her personally. I had inkling that if you present someone, you delve into their work in a new way, and indeed, Pille's works reached me on a deeper level after I exhibited and reviewed them. Strangely enough, standing at the exhibition I was nervous and I even had stage fright, even though usually I have no problems speaking to about 100 people. Perhaps it was because here I was representing someone else and on top of that, my entire craft.

**Carl-Dag:** I got the impression that you are an exception – the students are more chilled out about it. But I guess they are thinking something in the back of their heads.

**Hannes:** Yes. When an acquaintance or a student of the given interior architect comes along, you can indeed hear some thoughts around the stand. Basically, the students are still taking part in the history lesson of interior architecture there.

**Keiti:** The catalogue prominently features photographs of desks. Where did this idea come from?

**Hannes:** The desks in the catalogue form a set with the portraits at the exhibition. Both the portraits as well as the desks are moments from today.

Leila Pärtelpoeg's desk. Photo: Renee Altrov.



**Carl-Dag:** To be quite honest, these desk photos were a backup option. During our visits, we asked photographer Renee Altrov to take pictures of both people as well as their desks, so we had them. We also have other details of the interiors we could have exhibited. We also considered showing one important item from the home of every person, but it is good that we didn't, because the space is sufficiently concentrated as it is now. The catalogue was also the result of a quick creative process: namely, in the final stage of the process we decided to do away with all the captions within the exhibition. Instead, we made a little catalogue, which offered a good opportunity to show the photos of desks. The catalogue is something every visitor can take with them, yet it doesn't duplicate what is at the exhibition – instead, it is more like a part of the whole experience and complements the exposition at the hall.

**Keiti:** And the portraits play a very important role on the exhibition...

**Hannes:** Yes, we realised at one point that we must have these photos. In fact, we should state here that at this exhibition we are showing something that cannot be seen. In other words, we are showing the first works of these specialists and their portraits today – all this information that has been recorded on their faces over the years. Basically we are interested in what has been done between today and the beginning, and this is what we are presenting, but it is not shown at the exhibition. It has to be read between the lines.

**Andra:** But for example in the case of Vello Asi, you will see first his Stalinist works and then an old man sitting







Photo: Henno Luts.

on the windowsill, looking into the distance, reminiscing and waiting. What he actually did – he was a trailblazer for a new kind of interior architecture in Estonia – is not told through these two moments. Perhaps some layers will be lost on the visitors who are not that well versed in the history of Estonian interior architecture...

**Hannes:** I guess it does depend on how much you have delved into this field before.

**Carl-Dag:** For me, professional practice and completed works are not important in this exhibition. They do not have to be prominent.

**Hannes:** The important thing we were after was the fact that behind every work, there is a person. How they communicate, what they feel, what their world is made of. We asked about this in our interviews and we also tried to express it in the exposition.

**Carl-Dag:** I would rather hope that the exhibition does not fetishise history, but instead uses and interprets it creatively. A powerful contemporary filter has always been especially important to me. The people active today relate to history through the now. It is not about raising history on a pedestal ... The initial task of the museum was to create an impressive environment and a comprehensive atmosphere.

**Keiti:** Was the choice of people influenced by the logic of the department's archive – or lack thereof?

**Carl-Dag:** Yeah, there wasn't much logic there. In some ways, it is a subjective selection of the archive; many

important figures are missing, although some of them should be included. But these selected people had cool works in the archive and this is how our selection took form. For example, there are no works by Maile Grünberg or Toivo Raidmets there, with a few poor exceptions. We decided to not exhibit the works of department heads but they are all present at the exhibition, whether in interviews, as supervisors of students' works or in the case of Hannes, the exhibition design.

**Hannes:** Yes, Raidmets was my teacher and inspiration. In the early 1990s, he made an installation, which was a stack of planks with neon pipes between them. This object inspired me enormously back then in terms of form and ideas and I see its formal influence in the exhibition design – burnt planks. Raidmets is also often talked about in interviews.

**Carl-Dag:** Edgar Johan Kuusik, Edgar Velbri, Väino Tamm also prominently emerge in the interviews. One of the reasons for not exhibiting department heads was the fact that we did not want to focus too much on the institution itself.

**Hannes:** One of the most important results of this process is that I now value the archive more. I would like to continue archiving and getting deeper into it, as a concept could emerge from it on how to preserve things in today's digital world. There have also been many discussions at the Academy on what will happen to the so-called methodical funds in the future because there are no rooms designated for them in the new building. The fund of our department was also almost lost with the change of guard... I have

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come to think that the fund should not go to a museum; instead it should stay with the department. This way, it serves a purpose. My mission is to organise the archive and keep it with the department, so when the next change of guard takes place, I will pass it on with my position.

**Carl-Dag:** Yes, I heard that rector Mart Kalm plans to delve deeper into the EAA archives in the near future to get a better understanding of what is actually there.

**Keiti:** I think this exhibition is the second time since EAA's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary that the Academy's archive was shown to the public. Could this become an obligation of every department – to preserve and exhibit the works that have been created?

**Hannes:** Departments were already obligated to do that at one EAA meeting.

**Carl-Dag:** The state of these archives varies according to the department; where there have been people who actually maintain them, the archives are in a better state and there is a better overview of them. However, in some places, works are just lying about. It totally depends on the unit within the Academy. In the interior architecture department, the archive was neglected until now but still many valuable works are preserved there.

**Hannes:** We plan on digitising the entire archive (the materials of this exhibition and a bit more have been uploaded to a server by now) – this way, it would be the easiest to use it in studies and distribute it in professional circles. But I liked Carl-Dag's idea to exhibit the originals in the exhibition after all. The folds of the paper reveal more information. I think that in today's world, where everything is online, it is very important to go to that offline world and focus on the materials. I should actually send my students there on a regular basis.

**Andra:** Will digitising and the online portals of museums that bring all the old materials to the homes of researchers via memory institutions' web-portals change the curating and future of archive exhibitions in any way? Will this suggestive highlighting of experiential-spatial moments and connections have a more prominent place in the museum?

**Carl-Dag:** I don't believe the exhibition is that special. It is perhaps different in format and more event-oriented. However, when it comes to archives, museums are always places where specialists work and make a selection from the vast collections of the museum to show to people. Obviously, the methods and grounds for selection change over time. Regarding the digital revolution in the world of museums – on the one hand it is very nice that you can browse through the entire museum on your screen and that the average user can access materials more easily. However, if you're not a specialist, you often don't know what you're looking for because there is so much of everything, and that is why you need someone to make a concentrated choice for you.

**Keiti:** How is the Museum of Estonian Architecture handling the great national digitising programme?

**Carl-Dag:** Our main curator and researchers are handling that; it is not part of my direct responsibilities. I think that in any case it is positive that they attempt to digitise the more valuable part of our cultural heritage. It is a major one-time effort and once this layer is online, it will remain there for some time. However, for me personally, technology is just a tool in all this digital stuff and what matters is what is done with the content: who does it, how they do it, why they do it.

**Hannes:** Yes, I have also come to the conclusion that digitising is no miracle weapon – there is enough digital spam pouring in as it is. I rather feel that the physical archive must not disappear, as it has a different energy, atmosphere, and smell, which is lost in the digital. For example, you may touch a planchette that you haven't laid your hands on for decades – this act contains a very powerful exchange of information. If we digitise the entire archive, take it away to Lasnamäe and only browse it on the screen, then we drift away. We cut off the material from us with the screen... Perhaps this is an important aspect in the way our exhibition has been composed – with current students, we have not put a screen between today and history. It is as if we are moving in a time machine and are physically so close to different eras.

**Carl-Dag:** When you look at a two-dimensional drawing, you don't immediately realise that it is actually three-dimensional; a rapidograph applies pressure to the paper, there is gloss, etc. – and it is an entire world you're looking at. You cannot sense it when looking at a screen.

**Hannes:** Today I found myself thinking that we do fetishise the manual work – things made by hand – a little at the exhibition...

**Carl-Dag:** I have stressed that it is still the same genesis of meanings based on a bodily experience. Whether you are a visitor, an author, a creator – your mind and body always work together, both in the creative process as well as in experiencing an exhibition. It could be called a fetishising of the sensory side, but it is something that has been somewhat forgotten during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially now.

**Hannes:** In our department, this manual activity has been highly esteemed for decades: we have joiners' work, a woodworking workshop, architectural drawing. The latter, for example, is especially important as an exercise in concentration. Concentration and becoming absorbed is something I always try to address at the department.

**Keiti:** Expedition Wunderlich is a very well chosen title. However, Richard Wunderlich himself is not part of the exhibition...

**Hannes:** He was left out because of design considerations. I immediately liked the intrigue that there is a Wunderlich exhibition where Wunderlich is not exhibited.

It is like a homage, because we are showing his successors, the school Wunderlich founded. Of course, he is very much present at the exhibition through the people.

**Carl-Dag:** The EAA archives revealed a dossier with more than a hundred original drawings by Wunderlich. It was a potential part of the exhibition but we decided to leave it out. Wunderlich deserves a great hall exhibition of his own and some serious study. And his professional work and student work did not form an organic set. Hopefully we will deal with Wunderlich in a future stage of the expedition.

**Keiti:** What has been the most surprising feedback from the exhibition?

**Carl-Dag:** One nice thing is that if a person holds a drawing, small children also stop to look at it. This way, even

a random architectural drawing catches the attention of a child. This whole thing, the concentrated opening hours and being in the border zone between a performance and an exhibition helps to keep the intensity alive – you only have an hour there. We consciously discarded the academic and historic approach and let us to be guided by intuition and emotion.

However, during the preparation of the exhibition and even now I have an important question on my mind and I hope that we managed to at least partly answer it with the exhibition. Namely, how to engage history not too academically, instead keeping in mind the experience of the exhibition and today's visitor, i.e. through a strong modern filter, in a fresh way, so that the visitor would feel there is more at the exhibition than just history that has been dragged out of the archive.

Photo: Henno Luts.

