

# Ruins and the Breakthrough

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## Introduction

Cities are crammed with architectural and mental layers, grown ‘spontaneously’ throughout history, i.e. without particular attention or involvement. Their significance has built up over the course of time. Other architectural/mental strata have developed as a result of deliberate action, already exuding a message before their birth, pregnant with signs and conceptions attributed by people even before their actual materialisation. This applies well to the St. John’s Almshouse Pavilion in Tallinn, located next to a modern city artery splitting the historical Kivilinna suburb. The more democratic the processes of developing (designing) the city space, the broader the social groups that are involved. Each group leaves its own trace(s) on the designed object. Therefore it may be presumed that a space or object developing in the midst of the clashing opinions of different groups conveys an outstanding mass of connotative codes, which make it a particularly fascinating subject for study.

This article follows the (re-)formation process of the oldest suburb of Tallinn – the Kivisilla suburb – in terms of the accomplishment of a truly dramatic construction project, and studies the background of the birth of the newest branch of the Tallinn City Museum, the St. John’s Almshouse Pavilion. The author, as a participant in the process, opens the connotations (of the object quite apart from the architectural perspective) and points out the possible different interpretations of the newly developed city space. The abundance of translations depends on the position and awareness of the viewer. The object, associated with a lot of information, is never the same again. Knowledge is power.

## **History**

In 2001 the Tallinn City Government launched a carefully planned capital construction project: the extension of one of the main traffic arteries of the city. The 'breakthrough of the Tartu Road', as the undertaking was called, was supposed to connect the two major roads in downtown – the Tartu Road and Råvala Boulevard. The new street segment, beneath which a large underground parking lot had been designed, was supposed to run through old building quarters and cut straight through the territory of the historical St. John's Almshouse (Jaani Seek).

St. John's Almshouse, established around 1237, was one of the oldest and largest buildings erected in Tallinn, not a particularly well-developed town at that time (Kala 2001: 35–36). Therefore, it was very likely that the quarter crossed by the breakthrough would have an impact on a real treasury of different historical layers: in addition to strata of buildings dating back to various centuries, the plot was also known to contain a medieval cemetery of lepers. An archaeological excavation, one of the largest ever carried out in Tallinn, covered the whole area. During the excavation, the cemetery of lepers was not found; instead, a vast plague cemetery from the 18th century and the remains of two medieval stone buildings were unearthed. As a result of a fierce public debate, one of the buildings was finally conserved and is now exposed in a modern concrete and glass pavilion. The building was opened with festivities in spring 2004. Now in the heart of the city – side by side like friends or enemies – stretch the new breakthrough, bordered by high-rise buildings, and the centuries-old ruins packaged in the pavilion. The exhibition, opened in the pavilion, gives an overview of the history of the Kivilinna suburb and of the centre of it, St. John's Almshouse, from the 13th century to the beginning of the archaeological excavation in 2001.

Describing a case like this really gives the impression of a normal and swiftly moving European urban design process. But the true story of how the historical Kivilinna suburban area became the modern heart of the city, a fertile ground for wannabe dreams of a local Manhattan, is far more complex.

## **The conflict**

A glance at the city map reveals the presence of a congenital conflict. Some levels of the conflict were obvious even before launching the construction project, while

others unfolded gradually, just like the cultural layers of different centuries in the course of excavations:

- The architectural conflict is most apparent: modern high-rise buildings, with their technical approach to material versus the historical building layer – particularly small, flat and modest in contrast to the rapidly modernising environment (the St. John's Almshouse Church, almshouse buildings, wooden dwellings, small industries, archaeological ruins); the 20th century packed tightly side-by-side with the past, with no space to breathe.
- Modern society (banks, shopping centres, condominiums overlooking the Old Town and the sea) versus the remnants from the Middle Ages, references to the then medical, social and ecclesiastical spheres, reminiscent of the many unpleasant side effects of human life: leprosy, plague, syphilis, poverty, famine... A memorial to the everlasting message *memento mori!*, whose reproduction is ignored by the modern world outlook.
- The services and pleasures provided by the modern consumption society versus the ugliness and disorder of the Soviet industrial heritage, reminiscent of the then economic stagnation and the everyday discomforts we had to put up with.
- The dynamic breakthrough-artery, the euphony of traffic lights and headlights and the heartbeat of modern city life versus the centuries-long stability of the archaeological strata hidden in the ground.
- And finally – business and urban design activities versus heritage protection. This opposition first became evident in 1999, when the National Heritage Board sued the Tallinn City Government over the design in question. The parties reached a compromise then, but the levels of the conflict over the territory of the St. John's Almshouse went too deep and embers kept smouldering under the ashes for a couple of years.

### **The almshouse**

It is hard to overlook the social significance of the institution of the almshouse in medieval society. The St. John's Almshouse, related to the then medical, economic, social and ecclesiastical spheres, covers the most varied aspects of our urban history. Although the word *seek* primarily denotes a poorhouse in the contemporary Estonian language, it was the treatment of dangerous contagious diseases that led to the priority of the establishment. This is also revealed in the etymology of the word – in Low German the word *sekenhus*, or *sekhus* means 'hospital' (Kala 2001: 3).

Leprosy came to Estonia with the crusaders in the 13th century. While plague and cholera came and went in waves, leprosy spread slowly, but incrementally, scaring the population with a secretive, long incubation period and high mortality rate (Gustavson 1966: 22). It was a condition that families were unable and unwilling to take care of. 'The fact that the sick ended up in such misery ... can only be explained by the terror that people felt concerning lepers. In some cases things went so badly that even the closest relatives refused to give shelter and subsistence to the sick.' (Hint 1966: 70.) Persons stricken with leprosy became outcasts.<sup>1</sup> The writer Aadu Hint, who has explored the subject in two of his novels,<sup>2</sup> wrote in *The Windswept Shore* (*Tuuline rand*): 'But leprosy was not the same as death. Maybe it was worse than death....' (Hint 1966: 117.) It is significant that, when a leper was addressed or mentioned in conversation, people avoided saying the name of the disease (Kala 2001: 30).

These poor souls, who had been so cruelly whipped for their sins by God, were saved from a hell on earth by the House of the Brothers of Leprosy – *Domus Fratrum leprosorium de Revalia*. Leprosy was often considered to be a divine punishment for religious tepidity or flaccidity. The lucky ones untouched by the disease, who manifested Christian mercy towards the sick, were offered quick redemption by the almshouse: in 1363 the cardinals announced a 40-day repentance exemption in the name of the Pope for those who visited ecclesiastical services in the Chapel of the St. John's Almshouse or donated to the almshouse (Kala 2001: 24). Donations were probably generous. The St. John's Almshouse used to be one of the largest outlying building complexes in Tallinn and touched the life of every local Christian.<sup>3</sup>

Only a few buildings had survived in the almshouse complex by the beginning of the 21st century: the almshouse church, the poor people's hospital building, the rebuilt poor people's sauna and the foundation of an auxiliary building from the 18th century. The entire territory, covered with limestone and wooden buildings, Soviet industrial structures and sparse high greenery, wore an imprint of desolation and decline, and formed an odd, shabby-looking backyard between the new

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<sup>1</sup> Lepers were called 'outcasts' – *Aussätzige* in German. The word *pidalitõbi* means a disease in the Estonian language, which was suffered at *pidali*, i.e. hospital-isolator (Gustavson 1966: 22).

<sup>2</sup> *Windswept Shore IV* (*Tuuline rand IV*) and *Leprosy* (*Pidalitõbi*) (Hint 1966; Hint 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Leprosy has existed not only in medieval history and the novels of Aadu Hint. There were 28 registered lepers in Estonia in 1992. The last known case was registered in 2002 – a sailor, who had contracted the disease in Africa (Päärt 2004).

high-rise buildings of the 1990s. The area was related to unpleasant topics (such as taking care of the poor and the sick who suffered from contagious diseases) even 50 years ago – the Clinic of Skin and Venereal Diseases was closed only in 1960. Old paper mills and tanneries, spreading their peculiar smells, operated in the immediate vicinity of the almshouse until the beginning of the 1990s. It was an area where everything characteristic of an old town could be found: ‘...cats on roofs and in basements, drunkards in trams, pond-size puddles, dust, brownish snow, flocks of crows, words coming out wrong when uttered’ (Kaus 1999: 63). The entire area wore an imprint of Soviet economic stagnation; time and history had congealed – and all this in the heart of the quickly developing metropolis of capitalist Estonia.

Old-fashioned stagnation was meant to disappear: according to the new design, all historical buildings but the church had to be pulled down. Old blocks of houses disappeared and archaeological excavations began, revealing a rich cultural layer. Unfortunately the archaeological remains obstructed the construction of an underground parking lot. The plan to demolish the ruins triggered a fierce public scandal, as these were considered to be the ruins of the two main buildings of the medieval almshouse – the hospital and the chapel. Although the actual function of the buildings was not revealed by the archives, they became quite famous – actually the most famous ruins in Tallinn, a town with a preserved medieval town wall and the gorgeous complex of ruins of St. Bridget’s Convent (articles by Enn Soosaar and the archaeologist Ain Mäesalu published in the press can be taken as examples: Soosaar 1999, Mäesalu 2001).

### **Significance**

Human creations are among the most endangered compositions in history: even if they manage to continue their existence, they are still constantly threatened by a loss of significance. Their reality is symbolic, not physical, and such a reality requires a never-ending process of interpretation and re-interpretation (Cassirer 1972: 357). Fragments of the old almshouse complex managed to outlive the crisis of the breakthrough of the Tartu Road. The surviving fragments of matter, the low stone walls and the surrounding glass pavilion provide far more connotations than the surrounding layer of new buildings:

- **Indication of the oldest suburb of Tallinn** – the Kivisilla community, which developed next to an old trade road to Russia;

- **Bearer of the legend of Härjapea River** – the largest river in medieval Tallinn, first edged by tanneries and leather mills, later by larger manufactories. The developing industries polluted the river; by the end of the 1930's the stinking water was finally directed into a closed underground sewer system. The act of redirecting the polluted river underground might be ignored as insignificant, yet it must be kept in mind that Tallinn has never had a central river flowing into the sea through the town, providing embankments for buildings and opposing banks to be connected by famous bridges as in Paris, St. Petersburg, Florence, Prague... Tallinn has had to do without the Right and Left Banks and all the related associations conveyed by the names. Tallinn has no bridges with social and cultural functions, establishing connections between (famous) places, where people live, work and function (Lehari 2002: 54) or which would be 'symbol[s] of man's being between the sky and the earth.' (Lehari 2002: 59.) This is a lack that Tallinn now wants to overcome with all the new high-rise buildings – to establish this sensation of being located between the Earth and Heaven. Thus the memories of the former Härjapea River become more nostalgic and the idea of unearthing the river again, or marking its bed in the city landscape, are stubbornly adhered to. 'The Härjapea River once flowed from Lake Ülemiste into the Gulf of Tallinn. Without a doubt this river, abundant in water and fish, would have made one of the most picturesque and idyllic landscapes in Tallinn, with all the water-mills and dams, paper and copper mills, and the nearby cluster of almshouse buildings.' (Soosaar 1999);
- **Recollection of the pre-capitalist Soviet Tallinn** – economic stagnation, difficult and irritating for local people to tolerate, made the preservation of old material substance far easier than the ambitions of modern real estate development in present-day Tallinn. The cemeteries and buildings of the almshouse area survived the entire Soviet period and all the shock-work and industrialisation campaigns, safely hidden underground. Poverty has always been the best sparer of cultural heritage.
- **Symbol of a timeless conflict related to human activities** – the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, in his *An Essay on Man*, has highlighted the aspect of polarity in human activity, saying that an endless battle is raging between tradition and innovation, between the forces of imitation and creation. Such a duality exists in all areas of cultural life. Man is pulled into the force field of these two tendencies, one of which attempts to preserve the old forms, while the other aspires to cre-

ate the new (Cassirer 1972: 320). Provisionally speaking, this can be condensed into the opposition: rapid development versus sustainable development. It was a genuine battle between these polarities that took place at the breakthrough of Tartu Road.

The conflict was also characterised by fierce rage on the political level, as the man in the street interrupted the process of designing urban space, an activity that until then had only been directed by a conglomeration of political-commercial-populist interests. The logic of modern urbanism is a tricky combination of historical inertia, and accommodations of the real estate sector to the preferences of lifestyle consumers. Public urban space has been dissected both in time and space. The practice in which public urban space has been fragmented ('It is mall space, golf space, lounge space, and so on' (Lehtovuori 2003: 23)) is undoubtedly problematic. Therefore it is ironic that the tactics of an impending integrated and centralised solution would only have harmed the quarter. The place, bearing the traces of centuries-long human activities, was lucky enough to conserve its references to history through the same stage of 'being chopped to pieces'. One pavilion is far from enough for the area to retain its 'own face', yet the straight line of the breakthrough, its ideology, upheld by the rhetoric of progress, was broken; an 'error' occurred in the solid draft. Anonymous consumption space was accompanied by 'historical space' – the slightly sterile, yet perceivable air of the old neighbourhood, industry, Christian welfare and remote human activities. According to Cassirer, the dissonances latent in the two polarities of human activity finally form an entirety; these oppositions do not exclude one another; instead, they are mutually dependent. This is 'harmony in opposition – like a bow or lyre' (Cassirer 1972: 326). In the name of harmonising the outcome, a forced democratisation of the urban design process of Tallinn took place in the almshouse quarter. However, this aspiration for harmony did not achieve a satisfying balance between the old and the new.

We find ourselves in a situation where the physical existence of the ruins of the St. John's Almshouse continues, but the threat of losing its connotation(s) is stronger than ever. The 'symbolic reality' of the Kivisilla area is not viable enough, and its significance for the collective body is on fragile ground. In this way, the Pavilion of the St. John's Almshouse and its building are still a target of social mockery in Tallinn. The re-interpretation of the significance of the object by the

general public has mostly taken place on the mercantile scale of values – the ruins and the construction of the pavilion raised the cost of the entire building project by several million Estonian kroons.

But who can determine the price of the history of a town? Stories and legends about the outlying areas are appreciated by the citizens of Tallinn much less than the Old Town legends. This is fascinating, since the majority of citizens do not come from within the walls of the Old Town. It is the active promotion of Old Town, targeted at tourists, which has influenced the intellectual values of the citizens of Tallinn. But the purpose of this article is not to analyse the reason for the urge of the native inhabitants of Tallinn to forget their origins and roots in the outlying areas.

Walter Benjamin finds, according to Andres Kurg, that a town as a material environment is a reservoir of personal memories and accidentally encountered objects, or surroundings can bring long-forgotten events in the memory to the surface. The connotations of the material environment are not be inscribed in it; they are deeply personal and anti-tourist (Kurg 2002: 14). In this context, there is still hope for the Pavilion of the St. John's Almshouse. The author of this article, studying the photos exhibited in the pavilion, has had several *déjà vu* experiences: returning to a tram ride several decades ago, to childhood scenes of the now nonexistent town, seen with the eyes of a child through the greasy tram windows. Recollecting the mysterious isolation that made the plain board fence surrounding the industrial area next to the Tartu Road so intriguing. I remember the description given by Jan Kaus of the old area of Tallinn-Väike, which, together with Kadriorg, makes up the long-lost tram ride through Tallinn of the author: '...the same odours are circulating, the houses are as tranquil and dilapidated as 15 or 20 years ago, shaggy mongrels are still sniffing around, and tottering squatters each with a black eye.' (Kaus 1999: 62.)

What might be the outcome of re-interpretation, the new significance of the area in question, its shift in connotation fields as seen by an expert (the role that the author, through this article, has inevitably assumed)?

1. First, **an abandoned urban backyard**. The area had a clearly legible street network and the structure of a medieval (suburban) town. Wars, fires, and industrial and residential activities transformed the area, producing a rich layer of material and mental culture. In spite of hidden values, it was still a backyard, a dirty suburb, a marginal area in downtown that concealed references to unpleas-



ant and painful topics, such as leprosy, syphilis and poverty – the shady side of human life becoming almost a taboo in our modern society. The Kivisilla suburb had practically ‘vanished’ from the map of Tallinn.

2. Second, a **distinctive mental battleground**. After the archaeological excavation had revealed the history of the area in its full material beauty, the value of the almshouse’s territory increased in the eyes of heritage conservators and experts on history, but not for the business world or politicians. The historian Juhan Kreem points out, in his brief analysis of the topography of the almshouse, that the mere fact that the ruins constitute a monument from a period whose topography cannot be restored on the basis of plans and designs, makes the finds invaluable sources of information to study the medieval structure of this neighbourhood of Tallinn (Kreem 2001: 10). At the same time, political rhetoric loudly demanded the ‘demolition of this medieval lavatory’. In this way, the historical almshouse (which, indeed, hid the remains of a medieval water closet!) became the witness of a painful clash between different world outlooks and a target of excessive attention from the press.

3. Now: a **sign marking the oldest neighbourhood of Tallinn**, attempting to concentrate its history and connotations into one pavilion of ruins. Preservation of the ruins of the St. John’s Almshouse created a ‘place’ in the rapidly modernising urban space that was moving toward increasing anonymity, a place that is ‘connected’ with remote and recent echoes of memories and ideas. According to the approach of the anthropologist Marc Augé, a considerable part of today’s urban space – modern airports, shopping centres, tourist attractions and highways – represents ‘non-places’ (Augé 1995: 34). Towns, including Tallinn, are crammed with non-places. At which moment does a town turn entirely into a non-place? It will happen with the disappearance of its history – when the mental field of connotations disappears during material metamorphoses. Or, put otherwise, ‘when all the houses in Tallinn are reconditioned, it will no longer be the same town’ (Kaus 1999: 63). The breakthrough of the Tartu Road was that close to drowning in modernistic anonymity and becoming yet another ‘no-longer-the-same-place-in-Tallinn’ for us. Reaching for the unattainable and totally alien ideal of Manhattan, the Kivisilla area, together with its intrinsic details – the underground Härjapea River, the historical functions of the area (industry, almshouse, welfare) – is re-establishing its rightful place on the mental map of Tallinn.

## Irony

The outcome – medieval ruins in a modern urban environment, conserved and stylishly exposed – is a widespread method in European urban construction practice and has become almost unavoidable with finds of major cultural value. In modern cities, even the historical centres cannot remain outside the logic of specialised junctions; they become tourist, heritage and recreational magnets (Lehtovuori 2003: 22–23). Undoubtedly, there could have been better solutions for the junction of the St. John's Almshouse, but it would have required professional will and time to delve into the connotations of the area. The design, which had matured for several decades and planned to leave only the 'lonesome' church to mark the centuries-long active use of this area, only reveals the shallow nature of our own modern cultural layer. The critic of architecture Triin Ojari wrote: 'Public space became a ridiculed subject matter here, crammed in the bleak areas between the gigantic buildings – the area in front of St. John's church is complemented by the area across the street where old underground ruins are exposed. A better example of how private space of surrounding towers "eats up" these carefully preserved historic "islands" is hard to find.' (Ojari 2003: 20.)

Shallowness in planning is just one reason why the Almshouse Pavilion has not been 'accepted' by the townspeople yet. The re-interpretation of the Kivisilla residential area and the attempt to revive its spirit are also not eased by the striking lack of pedestrians – the first explorers of urban space, who give it a meaning – in the new street. Where should they come from or where should they go? This fresh urban space is characterised by architectural isolation and the omnipresence of transport. The question, so many times posed during the implementation of the project, of whether Tallinn really needs renovation, supported by modernist ideology, at the cost of liquidation of its historical quarters remains without an adequate answer. And the virus of 'breaking through' spreads slowly like leprosy along Råvala Boulevard, towards the historical residential area of Sūda-Tatari.

History, which allows people to laugh at it, is also generous with irony. The St. John's Almshouse, a welfare institution, also functioned as a financial unit in the Middle Ages, successfully existing until the beginning of the Livonian War. Several villages and estates, plus quite a number of houses in town, belonged to the almshouse. It gathered rentals, pledged real estate and lent out money to the citizens, the Bishop of Tallinn, even to the City Council. Analysing the economic activities of the St. John's Almshouse, the conclusion can be drawn that taking

care of the sick was just an ancillary activity for the place (Kala 2001: 18–20). Thus, it might be said that the low stone walls and ruins stretching in front of the high-rise building of the Ühispank bank building belong to a singular pre-capitalist financial institution or, if simplified to the extreme, to a ‘medieval bank’.<sup>4</sup> The circle of connotative fields is now complete. The city has come full circle.

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<sup>4</sup> The expression came up in newspapers; historians, adverting to nonconformity with scientific canons, rejected it as unsuitable (Mäesalu 2001). Still, the author decided to use the expression here, just once, to make a reference to the wide spectrum of possible interpretations of the case and the object.

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