

## Dissonant Heritage – Case Study: Estonia<sup>1</sup>

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The territory of Estonia was under the control of foreign powers since the beginning of the 13th century. The turbulence of World War I and the collapse of imperia opened the long-awaited possibility to create a nation-state that survived till the makeover of the political map during World War II and the occupation by the Soviet Union. The state that existed between 1918 and 1940 restored its independence in 1991. Not just the recent past, but centuries of wars, conflicts between big powers for its territory, rank segregation between nations etc. have formed the attitude towards the legacy of the past.

Such a background enables to demonstrate that the values as well as the notion of dissonance change over time. A relevant example is the acceptance of the mansions of the former Baltic-German nobility – they were not appreciated by the general public in the 1920s because they represented the unjust past of serfdom and social inequality. After the abolishment of ranks and the radical property reform the manor houses were preserved mainly for practical reasons – they were turned into schoolhouses and nursery homes. The early

heritage protection authorities started listing them as national monuments, facing often little enthusiasm and low support from municipalities. Now, a century later, after many political turns, these architecturally and culturally interesting buildings are considered as the pride of the rural areas and there is regret that only one third of this legacy has been preserved.

The same scenario repeated in the 1990s when people despised the buildings from the Soviet occupation period. Now many of the constructions from the Soviet period are listed and great efforts are being made to preserve what remains of the work of Estonian architects, as well the memories of life during the 50-year occupation. The effort to avoid blank pages in history even if the heritage objects carry very dissonant meanings is based on the national trauma of the abolition of memory by the Soviet regime. Even if the past is traumatic, it is important to keep the attributes of history as they help to remember and interpret the past. The architectural masterpieces should be evaluated for their architectural value and simultaneously interpreted in their political context.



*Fig. 1 Sillamäe will have a conservation area to protect the Stalinist-style architecture*

In this article I would like to present some case studies and initiatives taken to protect and interpret dissonant heritage in Estonia, focusing mainly on the second half of the 20th century.

### Traces of terror in living quarters

From the first decades of occupation a layer of government and residential buildings of so-called Stalinist style has been preserved, often decorated with the Soviet symbols and thus openly carrying the memory of times of terror and forced assimilation. It is common knowledge that the majority of these houses were built by war prisoners and the new apartments were reserved for people immigrating from other parts of the Soviet Union following the assimilation policy of the occupation. The conservators have in the past 10–20 years taken the brave decision to restore these buildings in their original glory. The most significant quarters of Stalinist architecture are protected either by the Conservation or Planning Act. The establishment of the Sillamäe conservation area to protect the authenticity of the former closed city which was developed as an industrial hub for processing uranium for military purposes is underway (Fig. 1). Booklets, guided tours, and building restrictions and regulations have given these areas a novel cultural cache and real estate value. Conservators and art historians have assisted the gentrification process of these quarters. Now, almost 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet regime, the negative ideological aura is almost inverted: Stalinism is explored as a curiosity, especially by the young generation. Real estate companies market the areas as valuable parts of the cityscape. However, one has to be very careful that the original narrative of the period of terror and occupation is not forgotten or rewritten, especially that it is not approved as normality, but explained in the relevant context.

### Misuse of dissonance as an argument

In 2007, the Estonian National Heritage Board, the Estonian Museum of Architecture and the Estonian Academy of Arts initiated an inventory of 20th century heritage in Estonia.<sup>2</sup> The critical impulse for this study was the demolition of one of the symbols of Soviet-Estonian architecture – the Congress Centre of the Communist Party, later known as Sakala Keskus in Tallinn (architect Raine Karp 1985, Fig. 2). The case however illustrates the situation where the dissonant background is misused for other purposes.

Already at the time of construction, Sakala Keskus was given scornful nicknames to ridicule the communist ideology it symbolised. Its unpopularity was mainly due to the fact that, although it was situated in the heart of Tallinn, it was usually closed to the public. After the restoration of independence, Sakala Keskus was turned into a cultural centre and hosted many well-attended events. However, the excellent location attracted developers and it was bought up by a private company. The new owners planned to demolish the building and replace it with a combination of cultural and shopping centre. They used the haunting ideological past as



*Fig. 2 Sakala keskus by architect Raine Karp was replaced by a commercial centre*

an argument to remove “this painful reminder of the occupation” from the city’s centre. The disputes over the demolition of the building were caught between the recognition of the architectural values of the building and the aversion to the communist legacy it symbolised. Only shortly before its planned demolition did the general public become interested in the building’s merits – its unique design, high construction quality, expensive materials, and decorative use of lime on the exterior, Estonia’s national stone. The protests against the demolition reached considerable proportions – in a very short time almost 10,000 signatures were collected in favour of preserving the building, the Union of Estonian Architects protested against the procedure, a public demonstration was held and a number of articles were published in newspapers. All this was in vain. The modern shopping mall with incorporated concert hall and a cinema is a reminder of corruption in urban planning, as regulations and permits were repeatedly ignored during the demolition and construction of a new shopping centre.

Another interesting case is Linnahall multi-purpose venue also designed by Raine Karp and built for the 1980 Olympics. It received many awards at the time of construction. Linnahall is an example of listing something as a national monument (1997) to prevent the planned demolition. Linnahall is one of the largest buildings in Tallinn and situated on one of the most valuable plots just between the Old Town and the sea. It was not difficult to manipulate public opinion in favour of demolition by pointing to the original name of the V. I. Lenin Palace of Culture and Sport and the poor quality of construction typical of the end of the Soviet era. The city intentionally reduced the maintenance and the building was closed for public events in 2010 due to poor condition. However, due to intensive publicity, the architectural significance of the building has become common knowledge and the public is awaiting its renovation. The unusual support was provided by Hollywood as the recent movie “Tenet” by Christopher Nolan used the building as a setting, which ap-



Fig. 3 Linnahall, photo from the Visit Tallinn marketing album “Tenet Location in Tallinn”

pealed to new audiences (Fig. 3). The municipality however, has been very ineffective in finding potential partners and funding.

### Neutralising dissonant heritage

In the former noble summer palace at Maarjamäe, Tallinn, the History and Revolution Museum of the Estonian SSR was opened in 1987. The Ministry of Culture at the time commissioned a mural that was suitable for the Zeitgeist, *Rahvaste sõprus* (Friendship of Nations, tempera, 1987) by Evald Okas. The high-quality artistic painting is full of Soviet symbols, including the coats of arms of the USSR and ESSR. The building was carefully restored for the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia and the new permanent exhibition was opened. The premises of the museum, especially the festive hall with the painting, are used for different purposes and the content of the painting may cause tensions for some events. A solution was found through a special electronic glass-cover that can hide the picture by just pressing a button when needed (Fig. 4).

Next to Maarjamäe castle there is an enormous Soviet monument complex completed in 1975 to commemorate all who had perished fighting for the Soviet Union (Fig. 5). This memorial by architect Allan Murdmaa is probably the best example of modernist landscaping and the main commemorative object in Tallinn during the Soviet era. Even though it serves ideological purposes, its high artistic stand-

ard and emotional power are ensured by its highly abstract solution. Even the obligatory eternal flame is surrounded by a sculpture of just two palms placed together, thus avoiding direct ideological references in the form and conveying a universal feeling of loss instead. Despite these careful considerations at the time of creating the memorial, it is still a symbol of occupation in a very prominent space in the capital city. Although there had been ideas to reconstruct



Fig. 4 The Estonian History Museum at Maarjamäe, restoration of a dissonant painting from 1987 by the students of the Estonian Academy of Arts, Department of Cultural Heritage and Conservation



*Fig. 5 At Maarjamäe the memorials to the victims of World War II from the Soviet period and to the victims of Communism from 2018 stand next to each other*



*Fig. 6 Bronze Soldier – a memorial to soldiers killed in World War II was moved from Tallinn city center to the military cemetery*

the area, a memorial to the victims of communism by JVR Architects was opened instead just next to the Soviet monument. The memorial had been planned for a long time as Estonia lost one fifth of its population of just over one million to Soviet terrorism. The memorial was opened in 2018 when we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia. There were several debates before the architectural competition on the location of the memorial and there was concern if the neighbourhood of a Soviet monument would be suitable for a memorial dedicated to the Estonian people who suffered from the terror of the Soviet regime. However, the brave decision has proved to be very suitable as it diminished the message of the Soviet monument. A third element of the memory field is the cemetery for German soldiers who perished in World War II.

The tradition of having statues in public spaces is quite modest in Estonia in comparison to many other countries. There were a number of political statues from the Soviet period, mostly compulsory monuments of Lenin and a limited number of other personalities. They were removed at the time of transition during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The majority are preserved in museums. In 2007, the government decided to remove the monument commemorating World War II from Tallinn city centre as it had turned into an artefact of political provocations controlled by Russia and in the city centre these always caused a lot of publicity (Fig. 6).

The removal was carried out at night and it provoked the riots known as the Bronze Night. Since then the statue in its new and respectful location at the military cemetery has not been given peace as pro-Russian groups gather there to celebrate the victory day of the Great Patriotic War. The relocation has not served its purpose, as the national and international press continues to give the activists the attention they are seeking.

In conclusion, it is obvious that dealing with dissonant heritage is a challenge that requires careful consideration. Removing dissonant attributes removes the artefacts that enable interpretation of the past. At the same time, care must be taken that such monuments are not used to provoke tensions in society. Dissonance, negative memories or meanings must be faced and explained to new generations with balance and respect for those affected and their descendants.

#### Credits

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Fig. 2: Photo Estonian Museum of Architecture EAMAr 6.4.8:56 <https://www.muis.ee/museaalview/4087053>

Fig. 3: Photo Kadi-Liis Koppel

Fig. 4: Photo Taavi Tiidor



<sup>1</sup> The article was written before Russia started the war against Ukraine. The evaluation and protection of Soviet memorials has changed radically since 24 February 2022.

<sup>2</sup> XX sajandi arhitektuur, <http://register.muinas.ee/?menuID=generalinformation>