

Declining Modernity: Demolish? Forget? Hibernate? Reconstruct?

Abstract

This paper discusses issues around and thoughts on why modern architecture is being abandoned. Do its materials and technologies depreciate (since many people have never liked modern architecture), or is it an escape instead to organic architecture that promotes harmony between human habitation and the natural world? This paper aims to provoke readers to answer the questions posed above while presenting the Estonian National Exhibition *How Long is the Life of a Building?* at the thirteenth Venice International Architecture Biennale. More, the paper is also about researching new methods for how architects and designers could discover the real needs of local regions and future users as well as the tangible and intangible values of the building, keeping in mind that the notion of value changes over time.

Introduction

Everything that is not used goes to rack and ruin. An astonishingly large number of buildings are vacant all over the world¹, in the countryside, in cities, and in Estonia as well. What should be done with the buildings from the 1960s and 1970s that currently stand unused? The topic also includes symbolic architecture, so to speak, that has attracted a great deal of attention in professional circles and is often the topic of conversation. What kind of life proceeded in them at one time and what could they be used for today, and who might need them tomorrow—what kinds of values do they have and how could they be preserved for the future? The question has been topical since 1964, when the *Venice Charter* established the principles of preservation, which relate to the restoration of buildings with work from different periods.

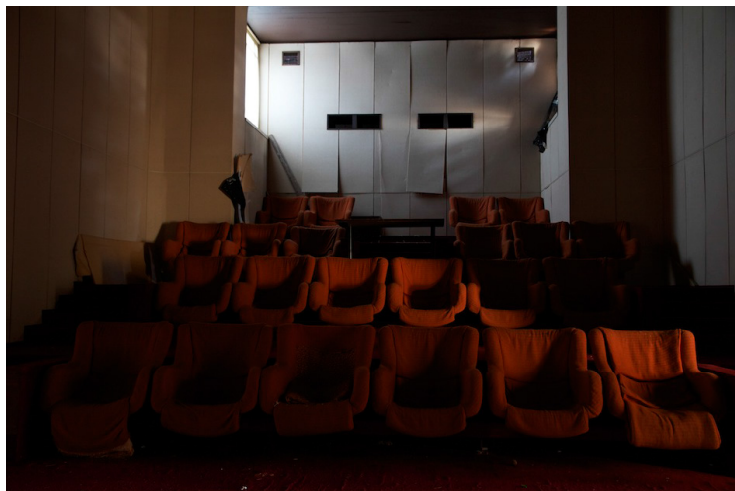
While no building lasts forever, in the wake of today's global economic crisis, it is not particularly sensible to abandon buildings with noteworthy architecture and sufficient potential for contemporary alterations. In order to preserve a building, it must change because buildings age physically and become outmoded. Unfortunately, everything that cannot be marketed dies out, including social relations. A historical building is like a work of art that has to be related to. Peter Blake remarked in *Form Follows Fiasco* (1974):

“All over the world, buildings that have been recycled from an earlier function to a new one seem to serve their users better today than they ever did before—and better than contemporary, brand-new ef-

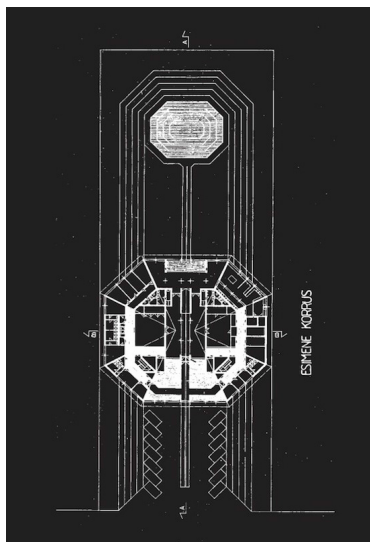


Declined Modernity 2012, former Laeva sovkhos, architect Toomas Rein

¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/abandoned-houses-detroit-2011-2?op=1> (23 August 2011)
<http://www.boredpanda.com/abandoned-house-animals-kai-fagerstrom/> (22 August 2013)



Declined Modernity 2012, former Valgeranna games building at the council of Ministers vacation complex, architect Meeli Truu



Declined Modernity, PLANS from Rapla kolkhoz, Põdrangu sovkhos

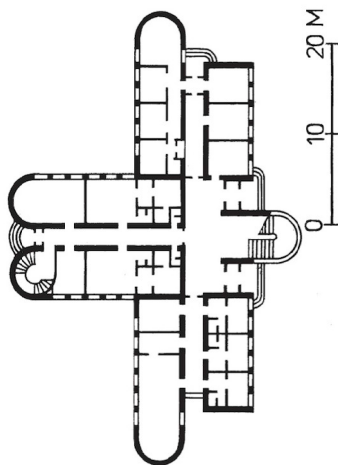
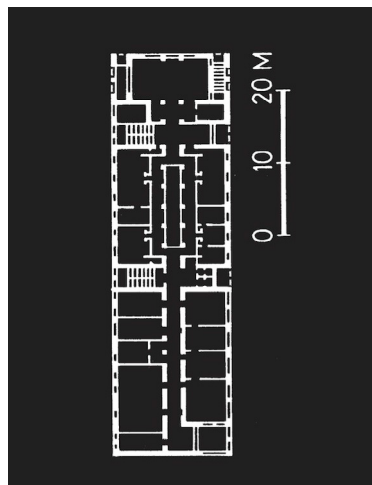
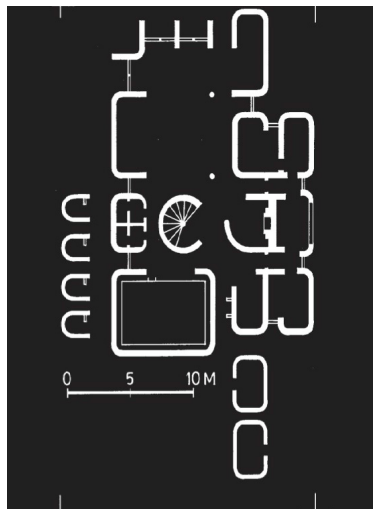
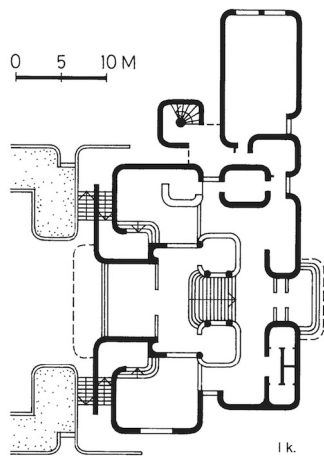
forts designed and constructed to a form that supposedly follows and expresses its function. The best museums in Italy and Spain tend to be recycled *conventos* or *palazzi* of the Renaissance or the Middle Ages, whereas modern museums, designed specially to display and celebrate the art of our century, look like cut-rate department stores with bargain basements up to the roofline”.

One could continue with examples from the neighborhood of modernity. The reference point of modernism—that form follows function—naturally argues against this and poses a greater challenge to architects. As a living organism, architecture is constantly being transformed as a consequence of the efforts of new users, architects, and builders without belonging to its creators; it is independent and lives its own life, reflecting values that change over time. This affects people first and foremost, in our own lives. How are different roles divided up in preserving valuable buildings and in how they function? The government, architects and the media can shape public opinion. It's a known fact that the nature of society has very clearly been expressed visually in architecture through the ages. What kind of effect, then, has the change in prevailing systems of government had on architecture and urban spaces in eastern Europe on a broad scale?

My research

As an interior architect, I'm absorbed by these questions as I go about as a passerby in different places in the world. My research project is about re-purposing an existing building through mapping the local region. I am looking for the functions by combining pragmatic needs and emotional feelings using human senses. The task is to find the values of the environment and to preserve these in the transformation process—keeping in mind that the notion of value changes over time.

How can new uses be found for buildings? The typology of a building provides substance for developing different lines of reasoning, especially if the plans and cross-sections of a building are viewed as a clean slate, so to speak, and the possibilities for re-interpreting life in that building are considered in polyfunctional schoolhouses, offices, libraries, spas, etc.—but these take the form of design speculations rather than fully-detailed schemes. I remember from early childhood how fascinating it was to explore the silicate shell of a gigantic, nine-story apartment building nearing completion. During the early years of the construction of the Mustamäe residential district in Tallinn, it was so easy to imagine my own future world in that space. In fact, the question of whether to build a new life from within a space outward or the opposite way from outside to the inside is of decisive importance. As an interior architect, I know that the former viewpoint can be complicated yet is nevertheless possible depending on the potential of the building, in other words on the possibilities concealed in its architecture. The latter viewpoint requires the architect to relate contextually to the surrounding



Declined Modernity, PLANS from Valgeranna, Kobela, Peetri, Omedu

environment and actual possibilities. *What, how, and for whom?* This is the inseparable threesome. The connection of these three is the key question for finding new solutions by using senses and feelings instead of the brain.

To analyze the spatial qualities, perceptions, and meanings of these spaces, I create site-specific exhibitions using different tools like lighting and sound. During the set-up process I ask different people (both in the local community and professionals)—who act as narrators—to talk or write about architecture, zooming in on the context and location of the building. This method has been tested in several ways in different case studies. The results from questioning different local people give me an idea of their attitude towards the revitalization process, as I see them more or less as future users.

“Architecture nowadays is not necessarily based upon architectural drawings or models, architecture studios can be much more diverse. A conventional awareness of architectural work will inevitably bring about a limited understanding of the education and practice taken by an architect. The spectrum of architectural work should include all built environments related to our everyday life; that is, architecture should be understood as the labour of those focused on human surroundings. The interpretation and questions exhibited in Venice, resulting from the notion of “common ground”, did indeed focus on the human.”²

The contemporary world's most important architectural event, the Venice Architecture Biennale, held last autumn for the thirteenth time, provides architects with an excellent opportunity to have their say in important topics that relate to today's world of architecture. Common traits in the form of similar themes and the use of similar language of form are noticeable at the architecture and art biennials that are held alternately year in and year out. The curator of this year's architecture biennale, David Chipperfield, encouraged participants to relate to other authors and their works in both the usual way as well as provocatively, which fits into the overall title *Common Ground*.

Estonia's exhibition project at the Venice Biennale³ dealt with how the respectable heritage of modernism is fading away, a process fostered by the economic conditions and political crosswinds that play games with plans. Why are distinguished and acclaimed structures that have functioned for only twenty or so

2 Han, Eunju, Space 539, Common Ground, Architecture for the People: The 13th Venice Architecture Biennale, 201210, p. 7.

3 Commissioner: Ülar Mark, Curator: Tüüne-Kristin Vaikla, Exhibitors: Urmo Vaikla, Tüüne-Kristin Vaikla, Ingel Vaikla; Maria Pukk, Ivar Lubjak, Veronika Valk (students' workshop). MOVIES

How long is the life of a building? – 18' 35 min / Urmo Vaikla

One Story – personal short stories about Linnahall – 25' 24 min / Jaan Tootsen

Archive film about Linnahall – 6' 25 min



Estonian exhibition at the Venice Biennale 2012

years being abandoned? In Estonia, buildings with excellent architecture like the main buildings of former *kolkhoz* (collective farm) centers, recreational buildings and schoolhouses—in other words the best examples of our modernity—stand forgotten. The exhibition in Venice was about relating to time and space: from present-day abandonment of important and unimportant places to the alterations and opportunities of tomorrow, and posed the question: how long is the life of a building? This same theme bears, to some degree, on architectural heritage throughout the world in the form of both remarkable and more cursory phenomena.

Searching for different viewpoints of our contemporaries, I asked people from different fields to talk about architecture—abandonment, lifespan, potential, identity—and composed the bilingual exhibition catalog⁴ for the architecture biennale in order to stimulate pertinent debate not only in Venice, but also in Estonia, as the fate of architecture with symbolic value is a topical theme nowadays. The exhibition catalog looks at the Linnahall case study as an example of postmodern mega-architecture in Estonia's capital of Tallinn and about its legendary past, but also about analogies in a cross-section of dilapidated and abandoned architectural landmarks of modernity. It is also about potential visions for the future through modeling in student workshops, where the appealing idea of “hibernation” was generated.

Linnahall as a Memory Container

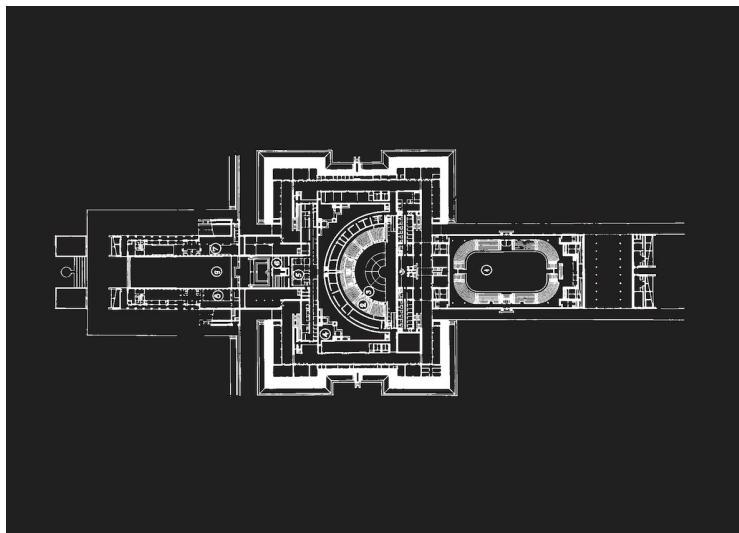
In the catalog, a larger story unfolds through the example of one building, namely Tallinn's Linnahall concert hall⁵. This monumental building, completed for the Tallinn sailing regatta as part of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, functioned for about twenty years and now stands vacant, covered with graffiti, and has aroused the interest of Docomomo (the International Working Party for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement). Time stands still inside—the heating system drones and the clock ticks. This building that once functioned on an artery of the capital city is now used only as the training grounds for narcotics dogs and policemen, or as a helicopter-landing pad, or simply as a place to enjoy the sunrise. We translated the drastic situation described above into poetic visual language at the biennial by contrasting the initial (and official), monumental range of uses for the building with recent spontaneous uses to help viewers recognize and relate to analogous phenomena in their own urban and cultural space. The exhibition related to similar projects that asked the same sharp questions about declining and recycling modernism built during the Cold War.⁶

4 http://issuu.com/vaikla/docs/how_long_is_the_life_of_a_building

5 Architects Raine Karp, Riina Altmäe / interior architects Ülo Sirp, Mari-Ann Hakk

6 Germany, Reduce/Reuse/Recycle: Architecture as a Resource, Biennale Architettura 2012, Common Ground, 29 August–25 November Venice, p. 198;

Albania, Heritages, Biennale Architettura 2012, Common Ground, 29 August–25 November Venice, p. 198;



Linnahall, Tallinn 1980

How should memories be shared between different generations? The aim of the exhibition was to discover the true soul of the building using facts from everyday life of the past with the help of people, the narrators—who give “the face” to the space and represent the abandoned space as a source of inspiration while creating a connection between the real and ostensible for the visitors, to affect the public with personal influence. The exhibition was a test-site to represent the selection of documentation related to memory of the place. It took the form of films—as real tools that perpetuate space and capture people in contemporary (art) projects—and some historical details, including signage from the building to provide the effect of the “real”. The movies⁷ were projected on large screens in a dark room, and a reflecting mirror wall from the opposite wall created a poetic space and feeling for the visitors of being present in the abandoned building (which may soon be demolished) sitting on an old leather sofa following the camera which lingers on the deserted Linnahall in its present ruined state.

“There is perhaps in an additional frisson in Venice which comes through the recognition that this structure represents the decline of what was once claimed to be an entire utopian system.”⁸ The other film presented different personal stories from the building’s users of the (Soviet) past—one that led them to realize an important truth or hinted at something in some way, or made them somehow happier or smarter or better. “A structure which could so easily be presented as a symbol of the failure of a much detested system, Soviet socialism, is instead presented as a rich field of Estonian memory.”⁹ The research that I carried out for the case study highlighted the importance of the building for people living in the twenty-first century in Tallinn and my personal experience and investigation at the Linnahall proved the same.

Potential solutions

How should the (Soviet) legacy of modernity be handled today and in the future? Modernist landmarks provided local villages and small towns with an identity, but now these timeless, now abandoned, buildings create a negative aura, one that could be perceived as a waste of spatial potential. They are excluded but not invisible. People have personal flashbacks with the buildings, and somehow they act as

Wolfgang Wolters, Mario Piana, Biennale Architettura 2012, Common Ground, 29 August–25 November Venice, p. 156;

Urban-Think Tank (Alfredo Brillembourg, Hubert Klumpner), Justin McGuirk, Biennale Architettura 2012, Common Ground, 29 August–25 November Venice, p. 154;

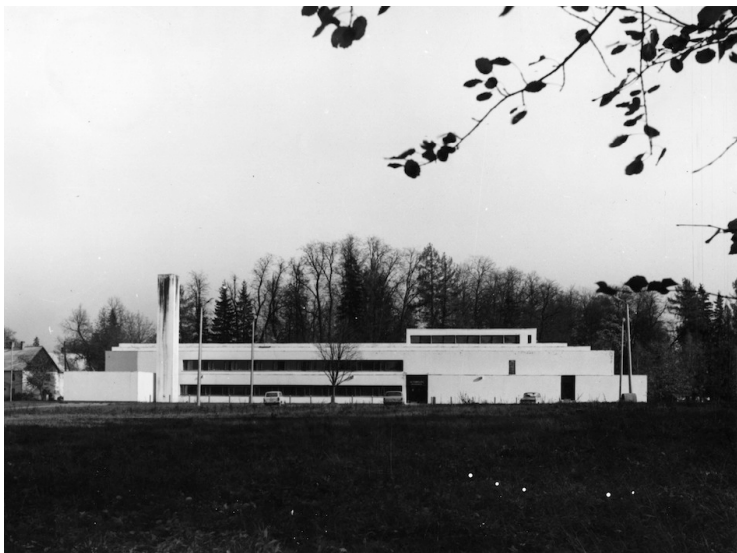
Mark Randel with Thomas Kupke, Philipp Oswalt, Tempelhofer Freiheit, Biennale Architettura 2012, Common Ground, 29 August–25 November Venice, p. 130;

OMA, Biennale Architettura 2012, Common Ground, 29 August–25 November Venice, p. 124.

⁷ How Long is the Life of a Building (18' 35 min) by Urmo Vaikla / One Story (25' 24 min) by Jaan Tootsen.

⁸ David Crowley, *Maja*, 3 (73), p. 60–63 The Linnahall at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

⁹ David Crowley, *Space 539*, p. 68. Common Ground, Architecture for the People: The 13th Venice Architecture Biennale.



Sverdlov kolkhoz in Tsooru 1977, architect Toomas Rein



Declined Modernity 2012, former Sverdlov kolkhoz in Tsooru

bridges between the past and the future. Despite being a symbol of the occupying regime, it could be a container for personal memories. Thus hopefully the interest of the young people of today in looking with curiosity at those buildings as blank sheets, and the possibility for them to do so, will not diminish—which is also a protest in its own right, in other words resistance against the anonymous solutions offered by contemporary high technology.

That the legacy of modernism would include these monuments is positive, not only for the architectural observer but also for the pragmatic person. Heritage protection laws, which protect architecture as a form, allow contemporary standards of energy efficiency to be ignored, making reconstruction work cheaper. There remains a dilemma whether to protect the material or intangible values of historical buildings.

What are the alternatives for a modern era building if a new function is not found? Abandoned buildings are a common phenomenon in contemporary, shrinking cities where voids and emptiness are a part of reality. This makes me think positively about the advantage of architects in creating innovative future visions using the contrast of past–present–future as different layers of memory like palimpsest even if it means partly demolishing historical monumental buildings. How much time do we have? On one hand, we are not ready yet for changes and are waiting for better times. On the other hand, too many examples of unnecessary modernism remain. The elementary fight against dilapidation should be the interest of local authorities in order to preserve the buildings. Otherwise, we must accept their collapse and demolish the landmarks from previous times into splinters for reuse in constructing new roads or small harbors; these polar solutions depend on the local context.

References

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Transformation and Metamorphosis: Paolo Portoghesi; Materia 73
Shrinking cities: master thesis / Mari Luukas; Tallinn : Estonian Academy of Art, 2011

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Tuljak café, Tallinn 1966, architect Valve Pormeister



Declined Modernity 2012, Tuljak café, Tallinn