

## **Spatialisation of urban culture in a large-scale event: urban visions and the program of Tallinn 2011 European Capital of Culture**

### **Spatialisation of culture, trajectories and large-scale events**

The concept of the “year of ECoC” unites time and space in the context of the given city (or cities). The year, as a long unit of time, becomes more intensive and dynamic along articulated visions and practices. These intensities take forms along various urban spaces and initiatives that become integrated into the ECoC process. Cultural practices of the (one-year) large-scale event are enacted within certain urban environments becoming more or less open.

The ECoC as a large-scale event combines both notions: coming up with new ideas and implementing these ideas/visions through a series of taking-place in the city (or cities). The “large-scale” event as a formulated unity is realised through singular events (of urban culture). This paper focuses on inventions that formulate intensities within urban spaces prior to the actual year of the event. The chance of becoming ECoC is encountered by cities and participating people and organizations. These encounters can be considered provocations that force those involved to imagine and intensify urban spaces. Appadurai (2003) argues that imagination is central to all forms of agency, is itself a social practice, and is the key component of our new global order. Thus the (spatial) visions of Tallinn as a forthcoming ECoC are approached as practices that transform trajectories and boundaries of urban spaces. This paper highlights some voices and visions/images concerning the thematic topics, focusing mainly on its stated European dimension and the diverse characteristics of “urbanity.”

### **Post-socialist background and shift to European society**

The environments of cities include various layers of time. The event of ECoC prompted a reassessment of associations between these distant layers in the context of Tallinn. The application brochure(1) of Tallinn (2008) for ECoC brought together ancient, medieval, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods in the following sentences:

*Stories about the distant land of Estonia were first told by the ancient explorers Pytheas and Tacitus. ...Arab adventure seekers rediscovered this place. It was at this time that the 12th-century geographer and scientist, Al Idrisi, identified Tallinn as the “most important city” in this northern country. It would be almost another thousand years, before Tallinn, with the break-up of the USSR, would finally become recognized for its unique location and cultural importance in the region (Tarand, 2008: 11).*

Such leaps of a thousand years certainly ignore many significant periods in the city’s history, although these few sentences attempt to mark clearly the moment of Tallinn’s recognition abroad and subsequent developments. Tallinn (the capital of Estonia, with about 400,000 inhabitants) was considered to be a prominent central point from which to redefine the Soviet background of all Estonia. Estonia is often presented in the national popular media as a Nordic country. The ECoC year has been seen as an opportunity for Tallinn and Estonia to make a (more) decisive break from the communist era and its

legacy:

*The appearance and substance of Tallinn impacts one's general impression of the whole of Estonia. In this way, Tallinn can help to rid Estonia of epithets still used in Europe such as "new" and "post-communist." A Nordic city by tradition, it was only occupation by the USSR that brought the erroneous stigma of being a Russian based culture (Tarand, 2008: 26).*

This quotation expresses an intention to erase the traces left by the Soviet Union in Estonia between World War II and 1991. The communist period is only slightly visible through images in Tallinn 2011's printed program(2): it presents the museum of the KGB (the Soviet political police) and one photo of the prefabricated apartment blocks in Lasnamäe. One can see that the conflicts between the temporal layers of Tallinn were distinctively expressed through the fragmentary spaces of Tallinn that fail to present a coherent (urban) identity.

The visions of Tallinn as ECoC aimed to highlight Tallinn's European identity. It was stressed that the city and Estonia had always belonged to Europe. Moreover, there was an aim to preserve Tallinn's mystical character, mediated as fairy tales bridging the real, the possible, and fantasy: "Tallinn's cultural program for 2011 follows the slogan 'Everlasting Fairy Tale,' suggesting that the impossible is possible and that dreams can come true in 2011. The city itself will be bridging the gap between what is real and was once considered fantasy" (Tarand, 2005:17). Interestingly, in the Estonian-language version the title of the application brochure and the slogan was different: "A City That Will Never Be Completed" (taken from an old legend). The metaphor of fairy tales was changed to "Stories of the Seashore," presented as the slogan of the ECoC program in the year 2010. The seashore of Tallinn, a spatial focus of the large-scale cultural event, was also one of the existing priorities of the city's general development plan.

The program director argues that "the fact that the program favors young people, communities and the seaside is a sign of the times" (Rohumaa, 2010). These priorities became more integrated into the program through the public call for initiatives for Tallinn 2011. In 2010, a year before the large-scale event, one publicly proposed cultural initiative or experiment took place in Tallinn every week. The purpose was to encourage alternative ideas and initiatives combining city environments and cultural practices. The Tallinn 2011 program lists every cultural event along with its (physical) distance from the seashore. However, some cultural infrastructure projects remained underfinanced as a result of the recent global economic crisis. Tallinn 2011's theme of "communities" remains vague, although some initiatives of city neighborhood associations are presented in the ECoC program.

The European dimensions of Tallinn 2011 are associated most specifically with Turku, Finland (and its Baltic seashore), which shares ECoC status concurrently with Tallinn. However, the simultaneous event with Turku was much more ambitious in Tallinn's application than in the actual program. There are still a few projects, such as kayak trips and the installation of a dancing tower that are being realized both in Tallinn and in Turku. However, the international dimension of culture events is strongly emphasized in Tallinn's program. Additionally, Estonia's cultural minorities have been given venues and time in the schedule of Tallinn 2011, but this aspect is not particularly promoted.

## **Qualities of "urbanity" and forming connections**

The heart of Tallinn's Old Town presents a rather uniform and compact collection of medieval architecture. But some steps further away begins a cacophony of different styles of architecture

side-by-side with shabby houses, empty land plots, and green areas. It is interesting to read how writers have thought about the cacophony and found some patterns of “urbanity” in advance of the possible ECoC in the context of Tallinn. Kaus (2005) argues that Tallinn is consciously resisting a coherent and common identity: “the anarchy coming from the suburbs and the hierarchy coming from the city center are just links in this chain” (translated from Estonian). This artistic expression of periphery-core relations in the city addresses only few abstract dimensions of spatial justice. There were attempts to define boundaries of the urban territory of Tallinn. According to Tarand (2005) the beginnings and ends of urban culture are defined by the city market square, and its locations in Tallinn have changed over the last century. However, some distinctive places emerge where urban and rural cultures meet:

*The place where cultures, urban and rural culture, meet today is the Song Festival Grounds. This is logical, as in the cultural border zone the carriers of both cultures feel a little uncomfortable—they are still almost on their land and certainly a not completely strange surface.... Further on come neighbourhoods surrounding the city, something in between the city and village, where people living a traditional life make the transition from one state to the other. These neighbourhoods are a specific camp of integration or adaptation where beginners can try out urban living and can raise their children to become almost-real urban dwellers (Tarand, 2005, translated from Estonian).*

The quote above refers to the more-than-a-century-old neighbourhoods of (mostly) wooden houses surrounding the city center of Tallinn. In the last decade these areas have been transformed by gentrification, drawing in younger and wealthier people. Even today, these areas of the city provide some positive integration of different lifestyles and environments. In the ECoC program, some events—including the initiative of the open yards and the street festival—are associated with these neighborhoods (such as Kalamaja and Uus Maailm) just outside the city center. The new initiative of open yards in Kalamaja focused on the evening performances of music, theater, circus, and cinema, and established encounters combining private and public in the context of house yards. It is a thought-provoking concept: that song and dance can unite the rural and urban character of (Estonian) culture. The Song Festival Grounds are certainly also a site and symbol of the continuity of Estonian culture, and this stage once more hosts a mass singing event as part of Tallinn 2011.

Tallinn’s application for ECoC stresses the importance of opening the city towards the Baltic Sea. This purpose is expressed through the “Kilometer of Culture” project, bringing together the revitalized industrial buildings, the former prison, and the existing cultural infrastructure along the northern sea coast of Tallinn: “the Kilometer of Culture is going to be a public space that includes cafes, art galleries, cycle tracks, concert halls, sports facilities and recreation areas for all age groups” (Tarand, 2005: 25). This ambitious project was delayed due to the economic crisis and institutional controversies. However, the effort to link the city center and the seashore is going on. The walking/biking trail was established to connect the formerly industrial sites that will be fully renovated in the coming year(s).

As a short walk on the path of the “Kilometer of Culture” in June 2011 revealed, several sites under construction were decorated with ECoC posters. The industrial buildings and prison were assembled for the stage of cultural activity. The potentials of these environments looked far ahead from the actual situation. Additional opportunities were created to spend leisure time in public space along the seashore. Some cultural events will also take place in these (partly) renovated industrial sites along the sea coast as part of Tallinn 2011. Similarly, the waterfront (dockland) area was the priority of Cork, Ireland, when it served as ECoC in 2005. There the waterfront was strongly associated with property-led development and consumption-led regeneration, and this tendency was contested by the art scene in what were characterised as anti-neoliberalisation debates (O’Callaghan and Linehan, 2007). Given Tallinn 2011’s

reduced budget, debates arose over whether infrastructure investments should go to the Culture Cauldron (a former industrial site along the sea) or the high-quality City Theater of Tallinn. There was organized voting (mainly on the Internet) to collect signatures of support, and public debates were held. The Culture Cauldron, as a future creative site of urban culture, was given priority. However, this decision process was partly populist and also influenced by the limited finances.

A look at the Tallinn 2011 program indicates that about one-third of the ECoC events are taking place outside of Tallinn's historic downtown area. Half of these events bring performers and participants physically onto the seashore. To be sure, associations with the sea and water can certainly be much more abstract, expressed through stories and performances. Music predominates slightly over all other forms of culture in the program. The connections between Tallinn and Turku will be drawn by the combined trips of kayaks and large (historic) sailing ships, and the one voyage by ship along the coasts of Finland and Estonia will gather materials for a thematic documentary. The Tallinn 2011 program also incorporates cultural performances from other towns and small municipalities of Estonia. However, the tendency (articulated in the ECoC proposal) to create a kind of representative center and a gateway to Estonia as a whole should be approached critically. As Sennett (2010: 267) argues, privileging the center may hinder the open system of "public realm" (as access and field of interests), influencing how people encounter multiple cultural differences in cities.

Tallinn's ECoC application also formulates some long-term expectations for the large-scale event:

*Upon completion of the program, Tallinn will possess an infrastructure designed to empower the city well into the future, far beyond its tenure as the European Capital of Culture, enabling Tallinn to host a continuous stream of high quality international public events that will establish it as a "destination city" for cultural tourism in Europe (Tarand, 2008: 17).*

This purpose indicates the tendency to elaborate new services and improve local living environments through the established infrastructure of culture in Tallinn. The established destination of cultural tourism was ironically compared with the (current) destination for weekend parties. The actual permanent infrastructure of culture in the framework of 2011 will be established mostly along the seashore (such as a walking/biking trail and renovations of industrial buildings for the Culture Cauldron and the Estonian Maritime Museum). Here parallels can be drawn with the infrastructure left from the 1980 Olympics, when Tallinn hosted sailing competitions. Some of this infrastructure (such as the Pirita Sailing Sport Center, the Pirita coastal road, and the City Hall of Culture) linked the city directly with the seashore, although the general scale of infrastructural improvement (a new hotel and post office were also built, and the airport was renovated) was larger than for the Tallinn ECoC. Aside from the permanent cultural infrastructure, various temporary installations have been established, and even a temporary building—a theater has been built mainly from straw (the material usually gleaned from grain harvesting).

The Lift11 initiative is a good example of the temporality of urban infrastructure associated with pointed and humorous interventions in urban public space. These interventions attempt to highlight sites that contrast with Tallinn's "postcard" image, to break down prejudice towards contemporary art in public space, and to draw attention to the ample array of opportunities for using city space (Lift11). The eleven potential installations were selected from the 129 projects proposed in the open call. Most of the installations were completed and opened to the public in May 2011. These urban installations have diverse themes and locations. Three installations create new opportunities for viewing, walking and relaxing along the seashore, as well as establishing connections on the paths of the "Kilometer of Culture." Some installations instead make pointed critiques, provoking questions about access and demolitions in cities.

The Lift11 initiative has created a new temporary dimension of public space (officially open until October 2011), pointing up some urbanity potentials of Tallinn that could be extended beyond the year of ECoC.

Mäkelainen (2005) argues that for Finns and other foreigners, Tallinn is itself a combination of old and new and is a unique symbiosis of Central European and Nordic cities and urban cultures. These characteristics are also elaborated extensively in the ECoC proposal, which, for example, brings together the medieval city environment and extensive free wireless Internet. The communication networks were also seen as an opportunity to integrate digital databases on city planning and elaborate the interactive initiative “Europe Plans Tallinn,” involving considerable foreign and local expertise (Tarand, 2005: 39). This (unrealized) initiative (not mentioned in the ECoC program) indicates that “there is continuing need for forms of critical utopianism that challenge the conditions of the present, that offer glimpses of other possibilities and that maintain a creative game with those conditions so as to figure alternatives” (Pinder, 2005: 265).

Nevertheless, ECoC had the effect, however limited, of opening truly new alternative trajectories of change for the city of Tallinn. The large scale of the cultural initiatives contributed to the qualities of existing collectives, festivals, and places.

## Discussion

This paper studied the visions of urban culture that Tallinn as a candidate city proposed in the process of becoming ECoC. The main focus was on how visionary spaces of culture destabilize the existing spatial relations between culture and city environments. These spatial relations were considered through stories and trajectories of change creating intensities within urban spaces. The study indicates that the process of Tallinn’s becoming ECoC opened up a forum to discuss relations between culture and city environments. The articulated visions spatialised the large-scale event of ECoC in the sense of bringing together interest groups, ideas and venues of happenings. The public was also encouraged to participate—to come up with initiatives and express perspectives about urban public spaces. The coherence and qualities of “urbanity” were discussed in the context of Tallinn. The tendency is presented by the (partly changed) aim to open Tallinn towards the seashore throughout the year of ECoC. This change was articulated by the visions/stories and also through trajectories of movement that materialised through the spatial plans and the walking/biking trail connecting formerly industrial sites and harbor areas along Tallinn’s northern seashore. The aim of opening Tallinn to the sea was written into the city development plan earlier as well. However, some cultural infrastructure projects had to be scaled down and renegotiated because of the global economic crisis.

The visions and the program for the Tallinn ECoC extended many already existing creative fields, practices, and organizations. The articulated vision was focused somewhat on the seashore of Tallinn, but most of the cultural activities were still located in the (traditional) halls and square(s) of the city center. Thus there were only minor attempts to rethink and actually transform relations between culture and urban environments. The hierarchical position of Tallinn as the most important gateway to Estonian culture was distinctively expressed in the first phases, although the ECoC program includes various towns of Estonia, links to Turku, and cosmopolitan aspects of culture. Massey (2005: 179) argues that “the real socio-political question concerns less, perhaps, the degree of openness/closure than the terms on which that openness/closure is established.” Thus the effects of ECoC on urban space should be examined within the process that extends the trajectories of change before and after the actual year of the large-scale event Tallinn 2011. The current study addressed only a few examples of culture initiatives that took place and generated change in the city.

The terms of openness are partly enacted through the material infrastructure of culture associated with Tallinn 2011. What is notable is the temporary character of some of this infrastructure, such as the theater innovatively built of straw (to be used for one season only) and several short-term art installations. Financial limitations apparently prompted people to consider how to revitalise existing environments and invent socio-spatial connections. Sennett (2010) argues that the “domination of specification” in spatial design too rigidly determines further functions and practices of culture. Therefore, the temporal infrastructure of culture mentioned above can challenge rigid specifications in urban design and thus open some trajectories of change. Additionally, the contested priority of the industrial “art factory” over the well-established theater partly reflects the tendency to experiment with more open forms of infrastructure for cultural practices. The challenge is how to sustain these positive effects of urban culture after the temporary installations are taken down and the budget for cultural initiatives is reduced next year. However, despite all the controversies and difficulties, the year of ECoC intensified some urban spaces and contributed to trajectories of change, integrating Tallinn with its seashore. The duration of this trajectory becomes part of a wider urban fabric.

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## Notes

(1) The application brochure of Tallinn (2008) for ECoC draws together opinions from about 300 people mentioned in the acknowledgments. These people include politicians, artists, social scientists, architects, and culture critics.

(2) See Tallinn 2011. Tallinn – European Capital of Culture, Programme, <<http://www.tallinn2011.ee/syndmused>>

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