

Old Towns' Heritage Protection Zones in the Estonian SSR

Preservation of old city centres by means of total protection

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Summary

This article examines the advantages and drawbacks in the protection of historic town centres during the Soviet regime. The modern development of cities after the Second World War included demolition of historic quarters. As a reaction to this conservation areas were formed for protection of the historic city centres. The regulations applied to these areas gave the heritage conservation authorities control not only in the issues of protection of the listed buildings and areas but also over issues of city planning and new development. By the 1970s the heritage authorities had gained twofold reputation, firstly, as the preservers of the national identity and secondly, as the inhibitors to the developing society. The heritage authorities took over full responsibility for the development of the historic city centres. This monopoly gradually caused the increase of ignorance and irresponsibility among the architects and the general public towards the heritage values of the built environment. These tendencies can still be observed today.

In addition to depriving Estonia of its independence, the Second World War destroyed an enormous amount of Estonia's physical heritage. The cities of Tallinn, Tartu, Narva and Pärnu were in ruins after the war, and other historical city centres suffered great losses as well. In the era of Stalinism, well-preserved and quite recoverable ruins were systematically destroyed.

However, in 1957, the State Open Air Museum was established, which seems incredible in retrospect. Tallinn's heritage protection zone was established in 1966, the Koguva ethnographic-landscape protection area in 1968, Lahemaa National Park in 1971, protection zones for nine historical cities in 1973, and the cultural-historical protection area of Rebala in 1987.

The traces of the Soviet system are most apparent in our architecture: bedroom communities for housing immigrants, city-type townships and villages for collective farmers, and enormous industrial structures. The first post-war general plans envisioned massive demolition and re-planning. Fortunately, these plans remained mostly unrealized. However, apartment buildings, department stores and cultural community centres were built in old towns during the post-war decades. Further demolition and ill-proportioned new structures were avoided in Tallinn and in a number of other towns thanks to the rising authority of heritage protection organisations in the sixties.

In the following article, I discuss old town heritage protection zones in the Estonian SSR, nowadays known as heritage conservation areas. The radical imposition of heritage protection ideology in order to avoid demolition and inappropriate buildings in historical environments,

under the model-project and efficiency promotion-oriented Soviet regime, was a significant achievement. As our song festivals have preserved our folk culture, forceful heritage conservation as the bearer of our physical memory and keeper of our architectural tradition became the symbol of our national movement and restoration of our independence.

Proportionally, poverty and economic crises played a large role in the preservation of our old towns. Estonian heritage conservation under the adverse circumstances present in the USSR was quite an exemplary phenomenon and certainly ahead of its time, even in comparison with the Western world. Its valid system provided heritage protection with an advantageous basis for establishing legal instruments *ex parte*, disregarding local authorities and owners. The protection zones of Estonian cities were pioneers in the USSR and received international attention. The organisation of heritage conservation and its authority in the protection zones were the favourite lecture subjects of the few specialists who had the luck to visit the West.

The first architectural protection zones were established as early as 1947: the Toompea in Tallinn (13th to 19th century structures) and Old Narva (15th to 19th century structures). As several buildings in the same protection zones were individually listed, a double protection was created.

In addition to the republican list, the cities of Tallinn and Narva, among 30 Soviet cities were listed in a special register with the post-war regulation of the Architectural Committee of Soviet Union. The planning and restoring of these towns required the consideration of the integrity

of the architectural ensembles and protection of individual objects of value.

However, the protection of the historical city centre was not the concern of the Narva city government; the government ignored heritage conservators' efforts completely. It was obvious that the immigrant city authorities preferred post-war shock work to the protection of the old city centre. The old town was for them an obstacle to overcome, a pile of ruins, which damaged the city government's prestige. All the efforts to reason with them failed and, in the first half of the fifties, quite well-preserved ruins were demolished and the second half of the fifties witnessed the rise of the pre-fabricated apartment buildings, which brought to a complete halt the rebuilding of the old town.

The pressure from the city government was apparently so strong that the heritage protection zones' list of 1947 was conveniently forgotten. After the demolition, the official statement declared that, except for the Town Hall and the Hermann Fortress, there was nothing to be saved.

The concept of a national heritage protection zone or area was presented in the Act of Protection of Cultural Monuments of 1961. The Council of Ministers' rather detailed regulations of 1964 did not include the concept of a heritage protection zone; in addition, Toompea and the Narva Old Town were not mentioned in the list of monuments. Perhaps the Toompea protection area was removed from the list due to additions in the list of individual objects, and the Narva Old Town was simply no longer existent. The Tallinn Old Town's protection zone, established in 1966, was introduced as being unique in the

USSR; there was only a vague reference to the abandoned protection zones.

At the beginning of the sixties in Tallinn, individual monuments were more favoured by city planners and the wider public than the Old Town as an integral whole. In 1959 the composition of the reconstruction plan of the Old Town as an integral unit was launched. The key word was regeneration, which involved the method of reviving old city centres or parts of a city, connecting the elements of conservation, reconstruction, restoration and repair. Regeneration made it possible to reconcile the old building heritage with the requirements of modern life, while at the same time preserving or even restoring historical or architectural values. Sometimes this meant changing the function and intended purpose. Tallinn set an example and the concept of regeneration was adopted throughout the Soviet Union.

According to the Statutes of 1966, the aim of the protection zone was to 'preserve, dignify and arrange the Old Town as a historically formed integral body, including all the buildings of historical and architectural value, together with planning the surrounding street network and topographical peculiarities, the gradual improvement of living standards and making the cultural property more accessible to citizens and tourists.' The regulations laid down requirements for research and planning, and vetoed (as a general rule) all new structures and expansions of living quarters by means of extensions, both horizontally and vertically. Heritage protectors were given an open mandate to regulate and approve, or disapprove, all matters regarding building and architecture within the protection zones, regardless of the objects' owners. During the 25 years of the Soviet

regime, the statutes were never altered.

Shortly after the creation of the Tallinn Old Town protection zone in 1967, a proposition was offered to also draw up heritage protection zones for the smaller Estonian towns. As in Tallinn, the emphasis was on the Middle Ages. The other cities' were valued for their medieval city structures and street networks, along with quite recent 18th and 19th century structures.

The approval of the protection zones by the bureaucracy went quite smoothly, with Tallinn being used as an example. Although the local executive committees were responsible for cultural heritage, there was no discussion or dispute about the matter.

The protection zones of Tartu, Pärnu, Paide, Viljandi, Rakvere, Võru, Kuressaare, Haapsalu and Lihula, with relevant statutes, entered into force with the council of ministers' regulations of 27.02.1973. The individual updated statutes for the protection areas of the cities were established only in the 1990s.

In addition to the above-mentioned, the protection zones of Kärđla, Narva-Jõesuu, Kallaste, Sindi and Laekvere were planned in the 1970s and 1980s but not realised. Valga was included only in 1995.

Besides ten protection zones, an updated list of cultural monuments was adopted in 1973. The total number of monuments increased significantly.

The Act Concerning Protection and Use of Historical and Cultural Monuments in the Estonian SSR was passed in 1961 and updated in 1977. Furthermore, numerous regulations were accepted. These documents, like the Tallinn Protection Zone statutes, were rigid and imposing, free from local interests group influence, and guaranteed by the power of the law. There is reference in

the documentation from the 1980s to the fact that the local governments had appealed to scale down the protection zones because they would hinder the development of the cities. Conflicts between heritage conservation and plans of local governments are still acute.

Heritage protection gave work to many conservation architects, whose designs were based on research and practical requirements. As the era demanded, the preference for reconstruction was stylized copies rather than modern architecture.

The old towns protection areas and their regulation zones form comparatively small parts of the cities' territory. Nevertheless, these small areas are the *crème de la crème* of every city, the dream working area for every architect. The right to also dictate conditions for new structures does not lessen the dissension between heritage protection and architects.

The majority of the newly created structures in old towns received icy receptions from the proponents of heritage protection. The suppression of architects' creativity and the eviction of modern architecture from the old city centres led to even more tense relations.

However, the establishment of protection zones did not guarantee the total protection of old towns. Even aside from the unfortunate case of Narva, harmful renovation work was performed in Tallinn before the Olympic Games Regatta and there was pseudo-historical rebuilding carried out in Kuressaare and other towns, which Soviet-era heritage protectors could not prevent.

The monopolization of responsibility, the poor relationship with local governments and owners, and the total defence supported by rigid and imposing

legislation resulted from the society's lack of ability to value its own heritage.

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