

Facade Plastics and Discussions of the 'Percentage Law' in Estonia in the 1930s

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In 2011 a 'percentage law' was adopted in Estonia. This law prescribes that one percent of the budget of public buildings must be used for art in order to enrich the public space aesthetically. Public discussions on this subject became active in Estonia in 2008: many articles were written, a large exhibition was organised and seminars held. The law was eventually applied in a different form than originally planned, but artists were pleased that it was finally adopted.

A percentage law was discussed both in Europe and in Estonia as early as the 1930s. That period was characterised by autocratic state leaders' decisive interventions into architecture and art, the strengthening of ideological pressure, major rebuilding of capital cities, and the strengthening of classical architecture, in opposition to radical modernism.

Sculptures and reliefs have been a part of architecture since ancient times and throughout all the classical styles. In the 19th century the Arts & Crafts movement again tried to achieve a synthesis of arts. The most organic symbiosis of architecture and art was created in art nouveau, until Adolf Loos associated the ornament with primitive peoples in his famous article 'Ornament and Crime' (1908). According to Loos, the ornament has to disappear with the development of a civilisation. Although Loos did not think of his position as being radical, his article came to be considered the starting point of the abandoning of ornament in modern architecture. In the retrospective styles, such as Heimatstil, neo-baroque and various forms of neo-classicism, as well as in expressionism and art deco, the ornament preserved its positions.

The anthroposophical movement and the teachings of Rudolf Steiner deserve to be noted as attempts to harmoniously merge different areas of art. Also, early Bauhaus was influenced by medieval mysticism and spirituality (Johannes Itten et al.) and considered the synthesis of arts to be the cornerstone of 'the cathedral of the future, the cathedral of the socialism' and the perfect way to unite the arts and politics. In 1925 the great art deco exhibition was a remarkable showcase for the synthesis of the arts. Fernand Léger's wall paintings were exhibited in a pavilion

designed by Le Corbusier. Léger believed that the new 'white architecture', with its reduced forms, needed to be enlivened by large paintings. In 1933 Léger gave a lecture at the Kunsthhaus in Zurich with the title 'The Wall, an Architect and a Painter', and in the same year he encouraged the architects at a CIAM congress to enliven their cooperation with artists. Léger, who was a leftist and an anti-individualist, felt that the new historical epoch called for collectivism. 'Individualism must give way to cooperation', he said.

The United States and Germany were the forerunners of percentage laws. In 1927 in Washington, D.C. a percentage of construction costs of the General Post Office, National Archives and the Department of Justice was allocated to additional art works and decorations. In 1933 Franklin Roosevelt started the PWAP (Public Works of Art Project) as a part of the New Deal programme. The U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture was established in 1934, obliging one percent of a federal building's cost to be spent on artistic decoration and ordering public art works. The aim had a twofold character: to consolidate commissions for artists, and to cultivate the taste of common people. Art competitions were thematically orientated. In these competitions, realistic art, most able to reach the people, was officially favoured.

In the Weimar Republic, the General Federation of German Sculptors (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Bildhauerbund*) raised the question of allocating one percent of the construction costs to the arts in 1923. In Prussia, the Ministry of the Interior published a regulation on 20 June 1928 which highlighted the need to include art in new buildings. In

Germany, the Ministry of Propaganda (*Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*) was founded on 14 March 1933, and its leader Joseph Goebbels also dealt with cultural issues. On 22 May 1934 Goebbels released a percentage law (*Kunst-am-Bau-Erlass*), which decreed that one percent of the construction costs of all the public institutions' buildings were to go to commissions for fine and applied artworks. The regulation included an aspect of social support for artists.

From 1933 onwards Hitler began to supervise the construction of new city centres and important public buildings. He also started to express his positions concerning architecture. For him, politics and architecture were inseparable. The Führer's personal efforts led to the construction of the House of German Art in Munich in 1933, followed by other representative buildings and objects. Hitler was fond of ancient Greek art, and therefore his buildings were to conform to classical standards. Neo-classical free-standing figures won back their position on pedestals and niches.

In Italy Mussolini began to construct the 'New Rome' and ordained that two percent would go for the decoration of buildings. A two-percent rule was also established in Norway in 1937. France introduced a percentage law in 1937 as a regulation from the Minister of Education. In Finland, percentage regulation was also first validated by an order from the Ministry of Education; in 1939 the regulation was accepted by the state. The Swedish Government set up a union in the 1930s to decorate schools – it was funded by one percent of the costs of the school buildings. In 1937 a national organisation called *Statens konstråd* began to deal with art and architecture issues in Sweden.

Allocating a percentage of the building construction costs to the arts also occurred in Poland and in other European countries.

A meaningful ideological conflict between modernists and modern-classicists took place in Italy in 1936, when Le Corbusier was invited to the Royal Academy of Italy in Rome, to the conference *Convegno Volta*. The opponent of Le Corbusier was Marcello Piacentini, the favourite architect of Mussolini and an apologist for modern neo-classicism. The collision was pre-programmed and the outcome was predictable: Piacentini, of course, had to win the debate and so he did. 'What we need are paintings that adapt to the new architecture. Coloured paintings that will dynamite the walls', claimed Le Corbusier. He thought art should be present in modern architecture as wall-sized abstract panels, which used bright colours and thereby changed the understanding of architecture. This position was similar to Léger's: art is a symbiotic part of architecture, rather than its 'decoration'. In the countries ruled by dictatorships, the understanding of the synthesis of art never became that avant-garde.

In Estonia, at the beginning of the 20th century sculptures for facades were commissioned from Riga and St Petersburg. The most popular artist was the German August Volz who worked in Riga and whose sculptures can be found in Tallinn on the facades of the Scheel Bank (2 Vana turg St / 1 Suur-Karja St), the Höppener Bank (9 Harju St), the Drama Theatre, the Dragon's Gallery at 10 Pikk St, the apartment house at 15 Roosikrantsi St etc. The first Estonian sculptor to collaborate with architects was Jaan Koort. In the 1910s he gained a commission from the Finnish architect Armas Lindgren to

decorate the facade of the Estonia Theatre (1913); however, this commission was not implemented. He also reached an agreement with Eliel Saarinen to create sculptures for the Credit Bank building (10 Pärnu Road), for which he modelled four sitting and eight standing figures. Of these, only two figures of sphinxes were installed on the top of the bay windows; regrettably they were taken down in 1921 because of their poor condition. From 1921 to 1923 Jaan Koort modelled the reliefs of the doors and windows of the Parliament building, and in 1927 the dolomite decorative door frames of the cinema Gloria Palace in Vabaduse Square (Freedom Square). Koort's clinker 'lantern holders' suited very well with the expressionist architecture of the EKA Insurance Company building (architect Robert Natus, 1932).

After the *coup d'état* in 1934, the State Holder (President) Konstantin Päts re-orientated Estonia towards the corporate fascist state model, more like Mussolini's Italy than Hitler's Germany. He divided the society by professions and created chambers of farmers, engineers, landlords etc. This system also applied to culture. Päts issued the Artists' Vocational Rights Act (1935). During the years 1937–1939 the founding of a Chamber of Culture by the state was repeatedly discussed. The *Reichskulturkammer* in Germany, established on 22 September 1933, was an obvious example of this. The idea behind it was to unite all artists, writers, architects and other intelligentsia under the supervision and control of the state. Many artists saw it as a promising opportunity to get commissions from the state and that is how it usually played out. However, at the same time the state achieved ideological control over artists and began to establish an official understanding of art. Following

the example of the German Ministry of Propaganda, the Government Department of Information and Propaganda was created in Estonia in 1934. This propaganda office also supervised cultural matters.

Like Hitler and Mussolini, Päts also started to express his personal understanding of architecture. He did not do it regularly, as Hitler did in his cultural discourses (*Kulturredten*). Päts's views must be ascertained from fragments of different public speeches. One of the first speeches of Päts, after introducing the new regime, was at the opening of the Tallinn Art Hall in September 1934. 'I hope that the art we see here not only finds its way to the cities and modern buildings, but that the whole nation will benefit from it. If this building is devoted to serious art then I want to make sure that this building will forever belong to artists.' It was not specified what exactly 'serious' art meant. .

In September 1934 when Tallinn Art Hall was opened, Hitler had already closed the Bauhaus and, at the annual meeting of the Party in Munich, he publicly severely criticised modernism (cubism, dada and futurism), accusing modern art of not being an ally of politics. What the German people needed, said Hitler, was German art which was clear, undistorted and not vague. Quite similarly, on 14 April 1935 at the opening of the Bank of Estonia, Päts emphasised in his speech the need for architecture to be understandable to the people. He condemned adherence to fashion. 'I have no wish to evaluate the style of a building, but it is clear that we must not build according to fashion, as then it will soon be out of fashion.' 'Work Needs a Facade' – that is how *Rahvaleht* titled the overview of the Bank of Estonia opening. 'Other nations who have not worked so hard take better care of the

appearance of their facade', said Päts. 'We also need to set up our facade if we want to be noticed among other nations.'

The expression 'building a facade for Estonia' was used frequently in Päts's rhetoric. In 1935 Päts released the Construction Law Amendment Act, which laid out the government's leading role in the reconstruction of the Tallinn city centre. The Tallinn municipality began to draw up designs for the spatial appearance of city streets and squares. They were approved by the government, i.e. by Konstantin Päts himself. With the Construction of the Nationwide Memorial of the Estonian War of Independence Law (1936), the Government gained the legal right to expropriate and demolish incompatible private buildings. For new buildings, Konstantin Päts personally began to sign the architects' drawings for the facades.

Dignified materials, such as dolomite and dark stucco, statues and reliefs, friezes, decorative flowers etc. appeared on facades in the 1930s in Estonia. Architectural beauty was directly associated with decorations: 'The beauty of a building depends on whether it has a good facade; whether there are art works, sculptures and decorations on it; whether it has a clearly exposed main entrance and whether the height-length ratios are wholesome. Of course, every detail, the artistry of a window or a door etc. enhances the beauty of the building.' (Quote from the newspaper *Tallinna Teataja*, 15 June 1938.)

The first facade sculptures in the 1930s were commissioned for the Tallinn Art Hall. It was pointed out by the competition jury that the statues should be in realistic in form. Statues by the sculptor Juhan Raudsepp were installed, after a delay, in 1937. These were the first bronze statues

on a facade in the 1930s in Estonia. The male figure called *Work* was not depicted carrying a heavy tool, but holding a newspaper (or a book), which indicated intelligence. The sculptures of the Art Hall were not heroic and theatrical, but calm and peaceful in character. There was suspicion that the statues had been influenced by Wäinö Aaltonen's *Eduskuntatalo* figures in Finland, although Raudsepp himself later said that he had not even seen those figures back then.

The sculptures of the Tallinn Art Hall led to discussions. 'Sculpture has been repeatedly used on the facades of modern buildings, unfortunately incorrectly. We cannot use free-standing sculptures at all in the facades', suggested the sculptor Ferdinand Veeber. According to him, the statues of the Art Hall, placed in semi-niches, seemed to be stepping out of the facade.

The sculptor Juhan Raudsepp also created classical statues (*Agriculture* and *Trade-Industry*) for the facade of the Bank of Estonia's building in Tartu. In addition to those, two large bronze reliefs, on the subjects of agriculture and industry, were commissioned for the lobby of the Tartu Bank, created by Aleksander Eller. The Tartu Bank was an exceptional public building in terms of the number of its artworks. Bank buildings in Võru (1937–1938, Anton Soans and Edgar Johan Kuusik) and Pärnu (1939–1945, architects Alar Kotli and Anton Soans) were also decorated with reliefs and sculptures. Aleksander Kaasik designed reliefs for a Võru bank. Figural reliefs depict allegorical little boys with faces of old men, carrying various attributes which symbolise industry, agriculture, fishery, domestic animals, mining, literary works and even book-keeping.

For a Pärnu bank, Juhan Raudsepp created two allegorical sculptures called *Industry* and *Agriculture* (1939). In 1941 he also designed four decorative reliefs for the Tallinn Culture House, among them figures of fishermen and smiths, which were not implemented. In February 1939 Aleksander Eller's high-dimensional relief depicting a family was installed in the staircase of a Tartu eye clinic, and in 1940 Eller completed two granite sculptures – *Trade-Industry* and *Agriculture* – for the Tartu Agricultural Bank, which were not placed on the facade as planned, but in the front hall.

The facade of the new Kopli community centre in Tallinn (1937, architect Elmar Lohk) was decorated with a frieze and a single female figure (sculptor Rudolf Saaring-Sõrmus). The Tallinn Hospital at 5 Tõnismägi St / 6 Hariduse St was decorated more richly: seen from Hariduse Street, the door had an Aleksander Kaasik sculpture called *Samaritan* (1939) on the canopy, and above the Tõnismäe Street door *Male Worker* and *Female Worker* (dolomite, 1939) by Voldemar Melnik (Melnik) can be seen. The Ministry of Education supported placing decorative sculptures, preferably thematic and educational, on the facades of school buildings. Juhan Raudsepp created the cement relief *Mother and Child* for the facade of Pärnu's 1st High School (architect Olev Siinmaa, 1939). This is one of the most dynamic and energetic of the Estonian facade sculptures.

In 1936 Walter Benjamin released 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. By writing about the work of art losing its aura, Benjamin associated art with the growing importance of the masses in society. 'Bringing things spatially and humanly 'closer' is for the masses today as passionate an

endeavour as their tendency to overcome the uniqueness of everything given by viewing reproductions', he wrote.

Figurative facade plastics can be interpreted as 'art coming to the people'; it was a kind of quaint outdoor art exhibition, whose exhibits, like monuments, were to be realistic and populist. The favoured themes in the 1930s were undoubtedly work and family. Highlighting the worker as a hero correlated with the fascist ideology, which indicated that it was possible for a 'regular man from the crowds' to rise to the pedestal of society if he only did his work well. The cult of youth and nakedness also spread in Nazi Germany; nudes that are nowadays considered very homoerotic were tolerated, although homosexuality was condemned in real life.

The subject of work was also often used in Estonian facade sculptures. But neither this nor any other theme made Estonian 1930s facades heroic and dynamic. Juhan Raudsepp's workmen do not flail away with hammers, but stand calmly and with dignity, or placidly doing something like the *Worker* (1939, cement, stone) by Oskar Goldberg, laying a brick wall on the facade of 6 Tartu Road. The theme of work itself was a daily topic among the masses as many of them had experienced the bitter taste of unemployment during the world economic crises.

The slogan on the German Art House was 'Art Is the Sublime Obliging Mission of Fanaticism', but Estonian facade plastics included neither fanaticism nor the exalted, characteristics unnatural to the Estonian character. Hence the facade plastics did not turn into diligent tools of ideology in Estonia. 'Going with the flow' instead of rushing into something, was also characteristic to architecture, which turned in the new representative direction

but did not expand it to colossal size: this happened in some projects, but these were not implemented. For the capital city, the scale of buildings remained 4–5 storeys. Even the Office of the President had only two storeys. In the second half of the 1930s a more representative street front emerged on the even-numbered side of Pärnu Road: 16 Pärnu Road (architect Eugen Sacharias, 1934), 20 Pärnu Road (Karl Burman, 1938), 26 Pärnu Road (Boris Tšernov), 28 Pärnu Road (Aleksander Vladovski), 32 Pärnu Road (Eugen Habermann, 1937) and others were all 4–5-storey buildings. Many of the 1930s facade sculptures have been removed; only a few of them still exist in their original locations. The *Male Worker* and *Female Worker* from Mellik's hospital building are still standing in a small vestibule next to the stairs to the clinic. Aleksander Kaasik's *Samaritan*, from the same building has been removed. The voids in the facades are crying for their original sculptures. Ordering new modern sculptures also cannot be ruled out: filling the empty niches of historical buildings would be very inspiring to today's sculptors.

The commissioner of the building of the Art Hall was the Board of the Cultural Endowment's Fine Arts Foundation. The Board also initiated discussions of a percentage law. This process began in 1937 with a notification letter sent to various authorities. Responses came, but they were not very enthusiastic.

At the end of the 1930s it was a tradition to organise art discussions in the Art Hall's KuKu Club. On 18 January 1939 'Sculpture and Architecture' was the theme of discussion. Many people participated in the event. The art and architecture critic Rasmus Kangro-Pool's speech opened the event: 'As far as our sculptors

are concerned, they have not shown anywhere what one would hope to see; assignments trusted to them, including architectural decorations, are not fulfilled well. The facade statues of the Art Hall, for example, do not fit at all with the style of the building.' This, in turn, provoked sculptors to complain about architects. Few architects were present, even though they had been invited. So it was assumed that for architects the question was irrelevant. Finally, it was decided that a memorandum would be sent to the Ministry of Education, where the new building law was then under discussion.

In a few months' time, the subject of the percentage law was prominently raised by the newspaper *Uus Eesti*. Probably, this was inspired by the introduction of a percentage law in Finland. The coverage by *Uus Eesti* caught the attention of artists, architects and ministers. The Minister of Buildings and Roads quickly announced that the situation in Estonia was already good enough. The Minister of the Economy supported the percentage law, because for most public buildings a percent or even more already went to their decoration and a percentage rate would just legally establish the current situation (in fact, the sculptures of the Art Hall constituted two percent of the building costs).

In the coverage by *Uus Eesti*, artists were represented by August Jansen, Johannes Greenberg and Ado Vabbe, sculptors by Voldemar Mellik, Juhan Raudsepp and Anton Starkopf, art historians by Rudolf Paris, and architects by Alar Kotli and Edgar Johan Kuusik. All of them, of course, supported the initiative, but pointed out different problematic aspects. August Jansen pointed out that the prerequisite for this law was 'a competent board',

who would guide the art commissions to artists and not to craftsmen. The architect Edgar Johan Kuusik saw an opportunity in the percentage law for artists to work on a broader scale, to increase the social significance of artists. The architect Alar Kotli felt that carrying out the regulation might be considered for public buildings, but would not work for private houses. The artist Ado Vabbe placed himself in architects' shoes: 'For the buildings to be more artistic, it is necessary, in my view, to allow architects to work more independently. Board action might lead to the personal signature of the architect disappearing.'

The sculptors drew the attention of architects to the need to integrate sculptures into the beginning of the design process and not after the building was finished. However, in the 1930s the approach of 'decorating' architecture afterwards dominated. Art critic Hanno Kompus discussed the relationship between architecture and sculpture from another perspective. He wrote about 'organic décor', a prerequisite of which was that the décor and the facade be made of the same material. The subject emerged with limestone buildings, which was considered to be the birth of the new national architecture.

Both art and architecture changed a lot in the course of the 20th century. In the 1960s the concept of the synthesis of the arts was favoured again. Postmodern architecture returned to the idea of fusing art and architecture, seeing an opportunity to return to architecture its artistic dimension. Later on, the boundaries of art became more and more indefinite, sculptures became site-specific, and installations were created by artists, sculptors and architects.

Architecture as sculpture can be considered to be one of the extreme results of today's symbiosis of art and architecture. Another one is art that infiltrates into building through designed materials, for example photographic concrete. It is clear that that the best results can be achieved when architects collaborate with artists accepting each other as equal creators.

'And certainly the history of public sculpture has been disastrous but that does not mean it ought not to continue and the only way it even has a chance to continue is if the work gets out into the public', said Richard Serra, an artist with a lot of both positive and negative experiences in public sculpture. His negative experiences have shown that abstract works of art are problematic for the public. (The case of Serra's *Tilted Arch* in New York ended with the physical destruction of the public sculpture.) Every writer who attempts to theorise on this subject returns to the complexity inherent in society: for example, how to determine who defines the 'public' whose artistic interests should be followed, or how to measure the effectiveness of the communication of art with the public in urban space.

Today's cities are full of bold and visually attractive messages, and very often their content is too simplistic. They oblige and direct (traffic signs), agitate (political posters) or advertise (commercial advertisements). Compared to these simplistic messages, the 1930s facade sculptures seem dignified and meaningful, even if there was no deep message originally written into them.