

Architectural history and new reality

Leonhard Lapin's textual practice

by Epp Lankots

The notions of “history” and “reality” have made a thought-provoking pair in historiographic debates for several decades. Today it would be rather difficult to disagree with the view that historiography is a field intensified by wide-ranging political claims to reality – from personal agendas to ideological doctrines – and that the Rankean claim to symmetry between past reality and mediated, written reality, or history, is a matter of the degree of dislocation of “reality” rather than an objective condition of history writing (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).¹ The questions of “reality” and “history” in the humanities and cultural studies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have also marked growing interest in how disciplines, including art and architectural history, create knowledge about culture and the past. Besides the means of knowledge production, there is also an increasing interest in disciplinary histories: in the case of former socialist countries, this has meant looking introspectively at the period and at texts in which cultural and historical analysis was strictly subordinated to very specific claims to representation of reality. The Marxist-Leninist doctrine prevailing in Soviet art and architectural history undoubtedly exerted an extremely formalizing influence on history writing. Yet self-reflexive historical probing enables today's reader not only to go beyond the strict disciplinary dogmas and to consider those historical texts as an exciting and multilayered fabric, but also to open up unexplored territories for historiographical consideration. These could include other textual genres or cultural practices like visual or performative arts, aestheticiz-

abstract

The article discusses the writing of architectural history in Soviet Estonia in the late socialist period as a particular form of historiographic practice in which the contact between “history” and “reality” is pursued through avant-gardist practices of merging art and life rather than the methodologies of academic art historical research, or Marxist-Leninist dogmas of history writing. The case is built on the “historical depictions” or the short texts on the history of Estonian modern architecture written by Leonhard Lapin, a member of a critical group of architects and artists in Estonia in the 1970s and early 1980s. The paper argues that Lapin's concept of reality as defined by the relationship between man and the “machine” was aimed at remodeling the whole understanding of modern Estonian culture from a logocentric to a spatial type.

KEYWORDS: Historiography of modern architecture, Estonian architecture, late socialism, Leonhard Lapin.



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ing or otherwise making use of history, etc.² This sort of “inventive” introspection means elucidating those cultural “biases” and their modes and conditions of operation that might not be revealed by the relationship between Marxist-Leninist doctrine and the endeavors of an academic discipline (e.g., how the understanding of a certain historical style or period was created and its explanation changed over the period in the academic discourse of art history). For a historian, however, the aim of this kind of “inventive” reading is not to dismantle a discipline, but to relocate certain disciplinary developments. In this article on Soviet Estonian architectural historiography, this relocation means shifting the focus from the narrow context of fluctuating ideological prescriptions to the wider field of late socialist cultural changes that form the context of the “alternative”

or “critical” historiography practiced by the architect and artist Leonhard Lapin in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Historiography of modern architecture in Estonia

Estonian art history turned its attention to modern architecture only in the first decades following World War II when the art historian Leo Gens was essentially the only pioneering historian and critic in the 1950s and 1960s to systematically research late 19th and 20th century architecture. It is understandable that the historians of the prewar Republic of Estonia did not get a chance to assess the architectural production of a period that was so proximate in time (especially considering the fact that changes in the built environment emerged in Estonia somewhat later), or to offer an independent perspective on modernism. In contrast, in Western Europe, Nikolaus Pevsner’s *Pioneers of Modern Design* appeared in 1936 and Sigfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture* in 1941. Furthermore, in mid-20th century Estonia, the main objects of academic art history had been shaped by the political positions of the preceding decades: research into the rich material preserved in Estonian medieval towns was initiated in the late 19th century by Baltic German writers and clearly served the interests of self-determination by building up a geography of art history that derived from their motherland. The art historians of the interwar republican period were also mostly engaged in studying medieval art and architecture, but due to the changing political dynamics and the initiative of Swedish-born art history professors at the University of Tartu (Helge Kjellin, Sten Karling), the local geography of art and the question of artistic origins were refocused on the Nordic-Baltic cultural sphere and regional influences.³

THE HISTORICAL REALITY and political conditions after WWII spawned unique histories of modernism both in Estonia and in other former Eastern-bloc countries – the authors had to find a way to narrate the overarching story of modern architecture from its period of inception at the turn of the century and write the developments in the interwar period as part of progressive Soviet architecture, following the ideological line all the while. The study of 19th and 20th-century architecture can therefore be regarded principally as a natural part of the Soviet teleological view of history: the history of architecture had to be extended right up to the “flowering” present day; thus the inclusion of modern architecture in this narrative was not coincidental but rather stemmed from the need to fill in all historical periods with consistent content based on the ideology of class struggle. By the late 1970s, the history of modern architecture in Estonia had developed its canonic form, marked by the chapters written by Gens for *History of Estonian Architecture* (1965) and two volumes of *History of Estonian Art* (1971 and 1977). Gens, who had dominated the discourse of the history of modern architecture in the post-war years, was accompanied in 1970s by the young architect Leonhard Lapin (b. 1947). At the same time, Lapin’s role as an historian is a subject of debate, since, besides being an outsider in the academic discipline, his “historiographical”



Leonhard Lapin in the early 1980s and in 2014.

PHOTO: MUSEUM OF ESTONIAN ARCHITECTURE, AVE. MARIA MOISTLIK/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

practice was not limited solely to textual formats but was part of cross-disciplinary strategies that involved, among other things, deliberately projecting his time on to the backdrop of history and tradition. His goal was to change contemporary architecture, the surrounding environment, and people’s relationship to it, thereby exploring the modern world and how its forms and ideas became manifested. The activities of Lapin and his friends Vilen Künnapu, Ando Keskküla, Andres Tolts, Tiit Kaljundi, Sirje Lapin (Runge), and other late 1960s and early 1970s graduates of the Estonian State Art Institute – many of whom later became members of an architects’ group popularly called the Tallinn School – were not limited by a stringent institutional framework such as a job at a state design institute. With happenings and performances, environmental art, print art and painting, architectural designs, writings, exhibitions, and seminars, they ventured out on a broader and more diffusely defined field, merging various media and venues and fusing different disciplines (architecture, design, art, criticism, historiography, theater etc.), and so have become rooted in Estonian art history as Soviet unofficial art.

WRITING TEXTS ON 20TH CENTURY art and architectural history was one of the tools in the group’s diverse toolbox – the vast majority of the texts being written by Lapin, who was an active writer, both of art and architectural history and of criticism and commentary in weekly cultural newspapers. Most of his art and architectural history texts were published during the Soviet period in the magazines *Kunst* [Art], *Kunst ja Kodu* [Art and home], *Ehituskunst* [Construction art], and the cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* [Hammer and sickle] from 1971 to the late 1980s. Some of them were written as conference papers or were published in samizdat collections, or remained in manuscript form and were

published only in 1997 in a book of his collected texts *Kaks kunsti* [Two kinds of art]. As a writer, Lapin typifies the rift between “studio” and “academia,” which became widespread in Western architectural scholarship in the second half of the 20th century, but which never really was an issue in Estonia, where architectural history has traditionally been written by art historians. This is one of the reasons why Estonian art and architectural historians have never truly embraced Lapin’s texts as belonging to the same disciplinary tradition, although they did not directly ignore: the two discourses – academic architectural historiography practiced by art historians and by architects – were kept strictly separated during the Soviet era. Lapin’s history texts were considered too subjective for the academic tradition and thus have been mentioned above all as a part of his art;⁴ nevertheless he has received some credit from architectural historians as one of the writers on art nouveau and functionalism in Estonia during the Soviet period.⁵ Despite the fact that Lapin has never considered himself as an historian, the debates about his role are illustrative of both the changing position of the reader and disciplinary re-locations of architectural historiography. Mark Jarzombek has emphasized the complex interwoven relationship between history, avant-garde and historiography, thus pointing to an opportunity to expand the definition of the “historiographic act” to include activities that go beyond traditional academic historiography, such as architectural and art practices in which history is used to contextualize oneself.⁶ Aside from that possibility, the keywords specific to art and architectural history, which include questions of style and terminology, modern and national, and primeval and mythical elements in the Estonian tradition of form, also enable us, I believe, to consider Lapin as part of the disciplinary development of art and architectural history in Estonia.

The new artificial reality

It has been noted in many instances that by the 1970s the socialist realist canon had only retained a rhetorical echo in Estonia while its content was in a state of flux, especially in literature and the arts.⁷ Although the realist rule of explaining art held its position in art history writing, as the topic selection still had to be justified by showing its relation to reality,⁸ in the seventies the ideological framework of representing artistic production could also be seen to be loosening up with the appearance of romantic elements of artistic individuality seeking a connection with the timeless and primeval in culture.⁹ With this general loosening in mind, it becomes noteworthy that the young generation, including Lapin, entering the art scene in Estonia in the late 1960s, did not withdraw from the enforced notion of reality, choosing instead to readdress it and rework it into a critical concept that became the center of gravity of their activities.

In his early texts dating from the early and mid-1970s – “*Taie kujundamas keskkonda*” [Art designs the environment] (1971) and “*Objektiivne kunst*” [Objective art] (1975), initially given

as speeches at two different artistic events¹⁰ – the young Lapin manifests the new reality as a cornerstone of his artistic program.¹¹ The machine becomes a central image of this new reality that Lapin calls “artificial”: he declares the urban living environment a central concern in contemporary culture, something that has become an evident part of everyday life through art and architecture and is a result of the scientific-technological revolution. A contemporary artist – an objective artist – is above all an architect and urban planner; Lapin refers here to the critical architect who “works in an exhibition space rather than being employed by the state design office” and who intervenes in or produces the environment rather than representing it.¹²

Both Mari Laanemets and Andres Kurg have considered Lapin’s notions of “objective art” and “new artificial reality” not as a belated engagement with technology and art, as they might seem at first glance, but as a reaction to the expansion of the postindustrial environment in late socialist society, including new communication and production means and immaterial networks that had fundamentally changed the concept and moral content of art and the role of the artist.¹³ Lapin’s critique in the early 1970s was directed at the failed Soviet utopia of industrialization that according to him resulted

only in the homogenizing rationalization of society. Yet instead of withdrawing from modernization like many other Soviet artists after the cooling-down of techno-optimism post 1968, Kurg suggests that Lapin, on the contrary, proposed that industrialization had not been extensive enough: he was looking

for an architecture that instead of being produced by the machine would itself be the machine providing multiple engagements with it and serving the very complex needs of its users – an approach Kurg links with groups such as Archigram, Coop Himmelb(l)au and others.¹⁴ In the context of art, Laanemets parallels this with Lapin’s famous print series – *Machines*, *Man-Machine*, and *Woman-Machine* (1973–79) – she sees a clear conceptual meaning behind Lapin’s obsessive serialism (the series consisted of almost 300 print sheets), as if he wishes to become a machine himself.¹⁵

THE INEXTRICABILITY OF ART and new reality also reveals the revolutionary avant-garde as the wellspring of Lapin’s art and ideas. He writes: “Recently however, it has turned out that some art movements from the beginning of the 20th century, such as Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism, and Surrealism, have reappeared in new contexts and on new scales, in a synthesis of new and old methods.”¹⁶ Hence building his program also included the systematic study of the transformation utopias of the early 20th century avant-garde, with particular attention to Kazimir Malevich’s work. This engagement with avant-garde sources in his early texts, and especially his belief that the avant-garde pursuit of merging art and life had not lost its salience, but merely become modified, remains a persistent element in Lapin’s work. It also appears later in his history texts through the notion of

“THE MACHINE BECOMES A CENTRAL IMAGE OF THIS NEW REALITY THAT LAPIN CALLS ‘ARTIFICIAL.’”

“living history”, by which he means that historiography should be in close dialogue with contemporary culture.

IN THE WAVE OF POSTMODERNISM that swelled in the late 1970s bringing with it questions of contextuality and of architecture’s relationship to history, focusing not so much on specific architectural problems as on the general human aspect, Lapin’s accents on art and architecture shift towards eternal qualities. He is now interested in how art can be transformed by giving up physical material and be led to emptiness, which is the beginning and end form of life: “It is to equate the state of life with space, to which all human speculations can be reduced.”¹⁷ This shows how, in spite of the reconfiguration among the central elements that guide contemporary culture (from machine-centered to human-centered culture), Lapin continues the project of defining the reality by reworking the idea of the “machine” into a more universal concept of space as a defining condition of reality. In a presentation delivered at a young architects’ seminar in 1978, “Architecture as art,” Lapin declared: “The problem of space is intrinsic not only to architecture but to 20th-century art in general. 20th-century culture is architectonic due to the spatial problem contained in it. The spatial problem dominates in the work of the painters K. Malevich and R. Rauschenberg, the writers M. Butor and J. Barbarus, the musicians J. Hendrix, and C. Santana, the dramatist P. Brook and many other great masters of our century; nor are contemporary science, philosophy and religious orientations free of the spatial problem.”¹⁸ Lapin now envisions all of 20th-century culture as being spatially determined, and he also anchors the history of Estonian architecture through the various decades of the 20th century to that idea.

“Living history”

Lapin’s interest in architectural history stems from his period working in the state restoration office, where he was assigned after graduating from the art institute in 1971, allegedly because his controversial reputation did not allow him to work in state design institutes.¹⁹ His historiographical texts dating from the late 1970s to the early 1980s include the titles “Art nouveau arhitektuur Tallinnas” [Art nouveau architecture in Tallinn] (1978), “Funktsionalismi kriis” [Functionalism’s crisis] (1979), “Eesti funktsionalism” [Estonian functionalism] (1981–82), “Poleemiline historitsism” [Polemical historicism] (1983), “Eesti loomus” [The nature of Estonian Art nouveau] (1982), “Art déco Eesti arhitektuuris” [Art déco in Estonian architecture] (1984), and “20. sajandi arhitektuuri terminoloogilisi probleeme” [Terminological problems of 20th-century architecture] (1986).

Lapin’s contribution to the historiography of architecture introduces a different approach to reading art historical epochs and their causality that is perhaps the most obvious difference

to Soviet academic architectural history. In the 1960s, Leo Gens had connected art nouveau primarily with the rise of national consciousness which, was of course presented as driven principally by class consciousness in Estonia, where the natives have historically formed the peasantry. Although Lapin is not able to go beyond the conventional discourse of the history of style, his writing shifts the causality from political to cultural, and in his accounts of art nouveau and functionalism most of all, he makes evident the new, spatialized reality, i.e. the man-made environment, synthesized into the universality of the natural and the artificial.²⁰ For example, he sees art nouveau in Estonia as primarily rooted in the geometric ornamentation of Adolf Loos, Henry van de Velde, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and functionalism as evolving out of the same geometric tradition, becoming realized in constructivist architecture. Spatiality for him is, in other words, a spirit that links different periods. This spirit has a clear dual model expressed in the at once rational and romantic, subjective and collective, autonomous and integral nature of art and culture. At times he leans on this foundation with such force

that his goal appears to be to re-work the whole concept of Estonian culture from the logocentric to the spatial type.

“LAPIN’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ARCHITECTURE INTRODUCES A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO READING EPOCHS IN ART HISTORY.”

LAPIN’S MOST IMPORTANT object of research was the “golden era” of the interwar Estonian Republic, which he constructed, unlike Gens in his writing, as essentially avant-garde. So while it might in some senses be debatable, it is not entirely false to accept the hypothesis that Lapin’s texts about 20th-century Estonian architec-

ture and the neofunctionalist buildings of the architects of the Tallinn school in the 1970s are one of the reasons why 1930s functionalism looms so large in today in people’s minds, as it is one of the most important symbols of the free, pre-Soviet-occupation Estonia. The Estonian art historian Heie Treier has even gone so far as to call Lapin and other architects of the Tallinn School “freedom fighters”, claiming that functionalism has turned into a symbol of the triumph and freedom won during the War of Independence in 1918–1920. In this line of thought, Treier argues that pure internationalism was never typical of the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde in Soviet Estonia, but was essentially connected with questions of nationalism at the level of memory and identity.²¹ This underpins the common view that modernism and avant-garde art in Estonia and the other Baltic states had, above all, nationalist characteristics.²² Yet it needs to be asserted that the nationalism of the Soviet avant-garde in Estonia was mainly created in the 1990s, soon after the end of the Soviet occupation (by Lapin himself, among others, who constructed this view in many of his self-mythologizing texts from the nineties²³) while later contributions readdressing the period and the experimental activities at that time consider the nationalist discourse as being clearly too reductive of the multiplicity of meanings and

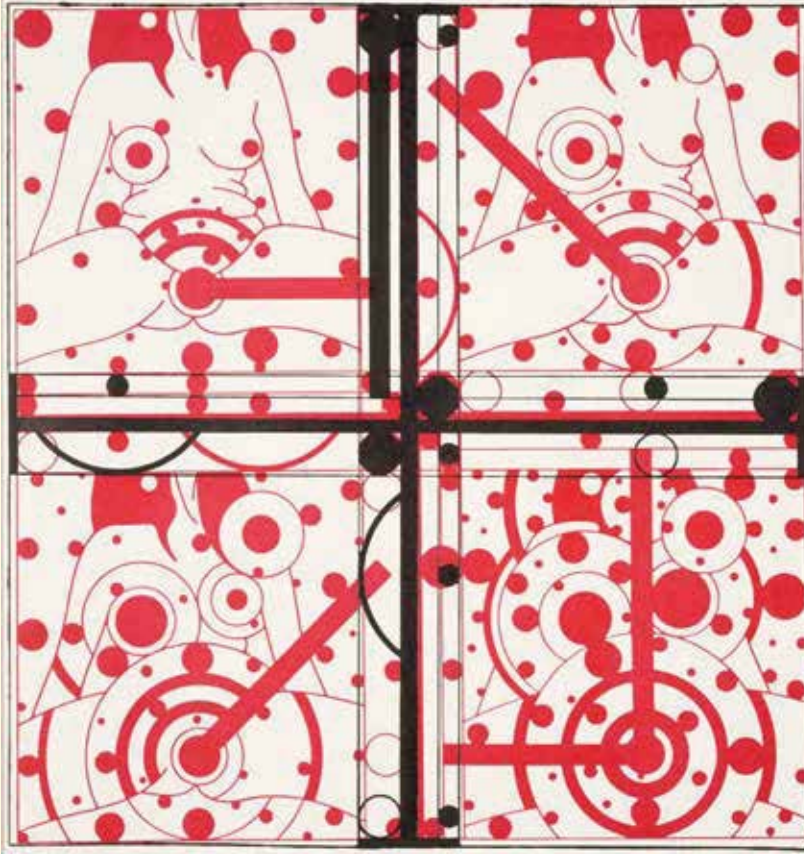
Leonhard Lapin, *Woman-Machine XIV*. Relief print. 1976.

PHOTO: ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA

contexts that critical art and architecture in Estonia operated in during the 1970s.²⁴

However, I believe it is not a complete overstatement to emphasize Lapin's role in the assertion of functionalism as a "paradigmatic" style, the primary marker of cultural modernity in Estonian culture. Lapin has been consistently building this tradition, yet he has done so not by holding onto certain historical values and thus moving backwards, but by constantly renewing and innovating functionalism. However, I agree that the programmatic nature of his writing has a part in creating the tradition of functionalism that has become a fixture in Estonian culture, of which the Estonian writer Mati Unt said: "Functionalism is a subconscious that cannot be got rid of."²⁵

LAPIN'S MOTIVES, which were strongly based on his artistic agenda, also became evident in his conviction that historiography should be a "living history," which enmeshes history in a dialogue with contemporary culture. Living history meant that the synthesizing of historical stylistic periods was again grounded in the totality and permanence of the spatial element in culture, something that was demonstrated above all through linking 1930s functionalism into the present day. Vilen Künnapu, an architect who was working closely with Lapin at the time, also demonstrates this as a shared conviction of the group as he writes in 1979: "Functionalism as a style or way of thinking can be viewed in very different ways, but it is impossible to ignore it.

Functionalism is within us. We can like it or not, but it is a reality. It is just as real as the 20th century, radio, the automobile, the airplane, Joyce, Beckett, and Picasso. I think the most important problem of contemporary times is pushing the borders of functionalism, its synthesis with historical experience and styles. Functionalism must arise from us, above all from the subconscious – as something synthetic, multilayered, contextual."²⁶ The concept of living history also signifies the shift in architectural thought to a more ontological level, as again exemplified by the reading of functionalism, which Lapin sees not only as an architectural style but a way of thinking and being: "Architects' conviction that architecture has a leading role in the culture of the era expressed the situation that had developed throughout 20th-century Western culture: just as in the Gothic period, architecture had become chief among the arts. The spatial problem again came to the fore in functionalism, not as a problem of the space between objects but as a problem of existence in general, which was expressed by the geometric language of functionalism."²⁷

It was characteristic of Lapin's writing on history that the synthesis also meant updating terminology and proposing different categories of stylistic periods. He believed that terminol-

ogy in the history of art and architecture should emphasize symbolic meanings, rather than the functionality of terms as used by historians. In this he followed his broader understanding of architectural history as something to be interpreted through its close relations to contemporary architecture. In other words, the terminology of history and architecture should create a link between past and present architecture. Lapin expressed his agenda in writing architectural history most directly in 1986: "It is possible to compose architectural history as an encyclopedia for the bookshelf, but it is also possible to create a living architectural history that ties in directly with what is happening in current architecture, becoming an inseparable part of it. We, the architects, demand living history from the scholars!"²⁸

The idea of living history shapes Lapin's narrative of the Modern Movement in a way that provides a smooth – and many would say uncritical – transition throughout the various historical periods and ideas. Again, this is illustrated by his treatment of art nouveau. First, Lapin describes art nouveau as primarily a tradition that has specific formal qualities and combines romantic and rational, female and male elements. He differentiates art nouveau and functionalism by claiming that the former is concerned with imitating forms of nature, whereas the latter is concerned with the structure and principles of nature ("form follows function"); then again, he finds art nouveau to be a general spiritual state common to all the stylistic periods, including Estonian functionalism and 1970s architecture. For instance, he

links the tradition stemming from Karl Burman – one of the most outstanding art nouveau architects in Estonia – with Tiit Kaljundi, Avo-Himm Looäär, and the work of Toomas Rein, Vilen Künnapu, and other architects of the Tallinn school of the 1970s.²⁹ Although Lapin classifies, divides, distinguishes, and associates to the maximum degree, he is not a positivist in the sense of a scientific tradition, for no matter what he is writing about, he does so based on subjective artistic truth.

Lapin's textual practice and its cultural sources

Reading Lapin, it becomes clear that his “reality” should not be equated with a kind of realism that construes architecture as a “natural” and direct reflection of its socioeconomic base; rather, it is a combination of the ideal and a real, which is, in fact, a specific feature of mythical thinking. As Krista Kodres has written, the ideal in its suggestiveness became even more real for “the myth-builders” than reality itself.³⁰ Attachment to universal elements in culture is common in general approaches in the Estonian cultural scene during the late 1970s and early 1980s – architects’, artists’, and writers’ interest in the cultural ethos and the leading principles behind the changes has often been considered a part of postmodernism on the rise.³¹

Yet the fusion of the ideal and the real is certainly not a specific aspect of postmodernism only: the faith in technology (cf. Lapin’s machine) and its ability to bring about social change forms one of the central elements, not only of modern architecture, but of a mythical content of modernity in general. Architecture, in this case, was purely an instrument; its form followed function and its goal was to change the world, not to represent it. At the same time, there was an urge to establish architecture as a pure art that follows its own internal rules (the aesthetic expression of the machine age). In one of his early articles, “Symbolic and Literal Aspects of Technology” from 1962, Alan Colquhoun describes those two opposite qualities – the aesthetic and the empirical – and their symbolism. He claimed that even architecture’s technological aspect in the 20th century had above all a conceptual or artistic meaning, not a factual one realized in construction.³²

SO, WHERE SHOULD WE locate this sort of mythical engagement with the idea of the real in late socialist art and architectural historiography in Estonia in terms of the wider cultural context, and how might its critical potential be explained?

Yuri Lotman has also emphasized the associations between modernity and mythological thought structures, in writing about different waves of interest in myth. Although he focuses primarily on turn-of-the-century neo-mythological trends, he sees a clear shift from the romanticist interest in myth to the realist intellectual movement that was from the start an intellectual trend aspiring to self-explanation, and one in which philosophy,

science, and art sought synthesis.³³ This sets the wider frame for Lapin’s myth-oriented historiography, in which we can see the Jungian theory of archetypes resonating and, more visibly, Nietzschean influences, and which conceptualizes past culture and architecture based on tradition, the goal of which, according to Lotman, is to “shape *all* forms of cognition as mythopoeia (as opposed to analytical cognition).”³⁴ So, using the terms of Claude Lévi-Strauss, we might see Lapin’s architectural historiography as a form of bricolage characterizing mythical or savage thinking, which has arisen through integrating colorful and disparate stands of material into one textual whole and which is often based on duality, on binary oppositions such as machine and nature, male and female, romantic and rational, etc. At the same time, Lapin’s history came about from the assembly of the material being investigated, contemporary art, the academic discourse of art history, literature read, music listened to, theatre performances seen, and fragments from the art world and daily life. Insofar as it places human beings at the center of history, Lapin’s version of history is indeed total; yet the interplay between the urge for integrity and fragmentation forms one of the elements that clearly distinguishes his history of the Modern movement from teleological accounts of modern architecture that see the course of architecture as an inevitable progression towards the present moment.

“THERE WAS AN URGE TO ESTABLISH ARCHITECTURE AS PURE ART THAT FOLLOWS ITS OWN INTERNAL RULES.”

CERTAINLY THERE were also direct sources that influenced Lapin’s thinking: information also moved in the Soviet Union and no one operated in an utter vacuum. In 1971, inspired by the new technicist reality and ideas of the information soci-

ety, Lapin wrote about contemporary artists having a plenitude of information in their arsenal, including references to his theoretical and philosophical influences (Freud, Nietzsche, etc.) as well as to radio and television.³⁵ In hindsight, Lapin has recalled the 1970s as a time when information flowed calmly and people tried to suck up much as they could; this is why the influences were so diverse (they learned about psychoanalysis and took an interest in existentialism, the absurd, Buddhism, etc.).³⁶ Lapin has also mentioned Roger Garaudy’s concept of “realism without bounds” which the young art historian Jaak Kangilaski introduced in Estonia as a platform for young artists to open up the concept of realism instead of dismissing it, and going beyond the representative quality of art by taking interest in its structural regularities and delving deeper into its spiritual sources.³⁷ Yet he never considered the importance of Russian art historiography, although he has admitted his Russian was better than his English at that time.³⁸ As Lapin identifies himself as an avant-garde artist and architect, his network in Russia at the time consisted of underground artists rather than art historians. Also, Lapin’s references in his articles are rather unmethodological, sometimes non-existent, but those he does include refer above all to contemporary Western literature that he received via his friends, mostly from Finland and Germany. Even in the early 1960s, ar-



Lapin used visual narrative to write history. A photo page from the magazine *Kunst ja Kodu*.

chitects had gained rather good access to foreign architectural magazines via the library of the Academy of Sciences in Tallinn. Lapin's, Künnapu's, and others' texts reflect their familiarity with writings and activities by Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, Robert Stern, and the New York Five, without much delay. The number of foreign books that were translated and published in the Stroizdat publishing house in Moscow show that architects and scholars in the Soviet Union did not live in a vacuum – quite an extensive list of books on Western modern and contemporary architecture was published, including works by Sigfried Giedion, Nikolaus Pevsner and Reyner Banham, and accounts by Soviet authors even on experimental architecture in the Western countries during the 1960s and 1970s.³⁹ One might say that Estonian artists and architects were familiar with the ideas of Western late modernism, although writing and discussions about them only appeared in the 1980s.

SO WE SHOULD NOT overlook the way in which the objectives and accents in the experimental architecture of that time paralleled radical Western architecture that Estonians were aware of. The agenda of the role and autonomy of art in Estonian avant-garde art (or architecture in this case), which Lapin also allows to resonate in his 1970s writings, was just as salient in the postwar critical architecture of the West, which was concerned with defining the role of the architect and the possibilities, not the bare actualities, of architecture; hence the obsessive search for architecture's fundamental codes and principles.⁴⁰ The difference was a matter of accent: instead of “machine” and “space”, the West was concerned with “typology” and “form”. The question of realism in 1970s architecture that retained a fundamental contradiction between autonomous aesthetic production and representation of reality also added further complications. While realism in painting or cinema, means very broadly, the similarity between the image and what it represents, the forms of architecture represent visibly, most fundamentally, architecture itself. Or, as K. Michael Hays has put it: “The real represented by architectural realism is a real that architecture itself has produced”.⁴¹ Yet just as, according to Hays, the commitment to the rigorous



The covers of magazines (*Kunst, Kunst ja Kodu*) in which Lapin published depicted everyday modernist landscapes and contained references to avant-garde history.

formal analysis of architecture in the 1970s in fact made the material of architecture stand against consumerism,⁴² and hence was more a part of the heterogeneous work of the neo-avant-garde, Lapin's new reality based on art and architecture was also above all a comment on or a reaction to his time, a program for intervention. It was a reaction not just to oppressive political reality and ideologized architectural practice, but more broadly, to changes in late socialist culture, such as a socialist consumerist turn and the rise of postindustrial culture, that the bloc underwent in the 1960s to 1980s, resulting from the growing influence of mainly Western mass culture, and from the increasing spread of consumer items and the petit-bourgeois lifestyle.⁴³

In this way, expanding the strict academic borders of Soviet art and architectural historiography from the realization of an ideological doctrine governing the representation of past reality to something that could be defined by very diverse engagements with reality and history means acknowledging that instead of being specifically “Soviet”, the architectural historiography of the late socialist period was also shaped by cultural changes present in Western late modernity. It was not necessarily out of sync with the Western world but was a cultural practice with more universal, transnational tangents, with common conceptual and formal features, in addition to specificities that stemmed from the conditions of late socialist society. It also shows that the experience of modernity in the Soviet Union as it was conveyed in the practice of historiography could also be perceived as deeply personal, interwoven into artistic and life practices and not undisputably and objectively conditioned.

THE CRITICAL POTENTIAL of Lapin's historiography thus lies in the possibility of reinventing Soviet architectural historiography as well as Estonian architecture. As Ulrike Plath has written, this reinvention is characteristic of histories that try to go beyond national history.⁴⁴ According to her, such playful, experimental or provisional approaches and reinvented histories are necessary above all for investigating the object of study from different angles, and they help to interpret the same thing in different contexts and identify intercultural transfers. By calling this collage-

like thinking a kind of intellectual gymnastics, which does not necessarily have to lead immediately to new research results, she sees its value precisely in diversifying nationalist histories.⁴⁵ In this particular context, the question is also about a different kind of treatment of Soviet society and reality itself, one that refrains from delineating stark contrasts (censorship vs. “writing between the lines,” cooperation vs. dissident movements, the USSR vs. the US, etc.) and sees the unofficial or underground discourse as having clear tie-ins with public discourse; one that also ascribes a range of meanings more diverse than executing official state ideology to cultural practices controlled or presented from positions of political power. This in turn enables us to see Soviet history texts, even in their own time, in a context which at least in some degree supports the plurality of narratives. ✖

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references

- 1 Leopold von Ranke's elucidation of the task of the historical study as showing “only what actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) is perhaps the most famous and often quoted statement in historiography, and originally appeared in his preface to one of the first of his substantial works, *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* [History of the Romanic and Germanic Peoples from 1494 to 1514] in 1824.
- 2 See for example Mark Jarzombek, “The Disciplinary Dislocations of (Architectural) History,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 3 (1999): 203; Kazys Varnelis, “Critical Historiography and the End of Theory,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 4 (1999): 95–96.
- 3 Krista Kodres, “Lüna täites: Katse analüüsida Sten Karlingi kunstiteoreetilisi vaateid” [Filling the Gap: An attempt to analyze Sten Karling's theoretical views on art], *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture*, no. 3 (2008): 44–45; Krista Kodres, “Our Own Estonian Art History,” *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture*, no. 3–4 (2010): 22–25; Kersti Markus, “Armin Tuulse ja kirikute uurimine” [Armin Tuulse and the study of churches], *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture*, no. 3 (2008): 25–26.
- 4 In an introduction to a 1997 collection of Lapin's articles and essays, Sirje Helme wrote: “Lapin is shaping the history of Estonian art. And not only the history of our post-war art, but also the history of Estonian art in the 20s and 30s, which emerges in the whirlwind of ideas, syntheses, and parallels offered in his writings”, and a few paragraphs later, she adds the opinion that Lapin cannot be objective as he himself is above all an artist. Sirje Helme, “In the Beginning There Was No Word!” in *Kaks kunsti: valimik ettekandeid ja artikleid kunstist ning ehituskunstist, 1971–1995* [Two kinds of art: a collection of presentations and articles on art and construction art, 1971–1995] by Leonhard Lapin (Tallinn: Kunst, 1997), 194.
- 5 Mart Kalm, “Kattes välja: Eesti 20. sajandi arhitektuuri uurimisest” [On studying Estonian 20th century architecture] in *Eesti kunstiteadus ja kriitika 20. sajandil* [Estonian art history and criticism], ed. Tiina Abel and Piret Lindpere (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2002), 104.
- 6 M. Jarzombek, *The Psychologizing of Modernity: Art, Architecture, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–15.
- 7 The literary historian Jaan Undusk has argued that socialist realism was an ambiguous and empty term that could essentially be used to encompass everything that was written and created in the Soviet Union, and shown how this ideological umbrella term increasingly had to adapt to spontaneous developments in the state and cultural field. Jaan Undusk, “Sotsialistliku realismi lenduv reaalsus: esteetika kui reaalpoliitika riist” [The volatile reality of socialist realism: Aesthetics as a tool of realpolitik], *Vikerkaar* 6 (2013): 40.
- 8 Krista Kodres, “Writing the Renaissance: Mai Lumiste and the Soviet Art History Discourse,” *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture*, no. 3–4 (2013): 46–47.
- 9 Epp Lankots, *Moodsa arhitektuuri kriitiline historiograafia. Modernsuse käsitletud Leo Gensi ja Leonhard Lapini arhitektuuriajaloolistes tekstides 1960.–1980. aastail*. [Historiography of modern architecture, critical historiography of modern architecture: Narrating modernity in the architectural histories of Leo Gens and Leonhard Lapin in the 1960s–1980s]. (PhD diss., Estonian Academy of Arts, 2014), 99–103.
- 10 The former was a speech at the exhibition of independent student works at the State Art Institute in 1971 and the latter a paper he presented in *Harku '75: Objects, Concepts*, – an exhibition and symposium that took place at the Institute of Experimental Biology in Harku, near Tallinn, in 1975.
- 11 Leonhard Lapin, “Taie kujundamas keskkonda” [Art designs the environment] in *Kaks kunsti*, 16–18; Leonhard Lapin, “Objective art,” *ARTMargins* 2 (2013): 172–185.
- 12 Leonhard Lapin, “Taie kujundamas keskkonda” [Art designs the environment], 16.
- 13 Mari Laanemets, “Kunst kunsti vastu: Kunstniku rolli ja positsiooni ümbermõtestamise katsest eesti kunstis 1970. aastatel” [Art against art. rethinking the role and position of the artist in Estonian art in the 1970s], *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture* 1–2 (2011): 65–66; Andres Kurg, “Introduction to Leonhard Lapin's ‘Objective Art’,” *ARTMargins* 2 (2013): 163–167.
- 14 Kurg, “Introduction to Leonhard Lapin's ‘Objective Art’,” 167.
- 15 Laanemets, “Kunst kunsti vastu” [Art against art], 67. Lapin himself has written about the series as follows: “In the series of pictures *Masinad*, I don't imagine, don't reflect, don't even analyze the natural world of machines; instead I symbolically represent how the world reflects back in my consciousness. [...] My goal is not, analogously to classical Constructivism, to exalt the artificial environment by implementing it in art, or analogously to neoromantics (Surrealists, Dadaists, abstractionists), to expose it, but simply to present the natural world of machinery as a real fact via visual art.” (Leonhard Lapin, “Masinad” [Machines], in Lapin, *Kaks kunsti*, 59.)
- 16 Lapin, “Objective art,” 176.
- 17 Leonhard Lapin, “Kunst kunsti vastu” [Art against art], in Leonhard Lapin, *Valimik artikleid ja ettekandeid kunstist 1967–1977* [Selection of articles and papers on art 1967–1977] (manuscript, Tallinn, 1977), 84.
- 18 Leonhard Lapin, “Arhitektuur kui kunst” [Architecture as art] in *Arhitektuur: kogumik ettekandeid, artikleid, vastukajasid, dokumente ja tõlkeid uuemast arhitektuurist* [Architecture: collection of papers, articles, reactions, documents, and translations about contemporary architecture], ed. Leonhard Lapin. (Manuscript. Tallinn, 1979), 7.
- 19 Lapin himself has said that his time working under the supervision of the art historian Helmi Üprus in the restoration office was the reason he started writing articles and books in the first place. Üprus taught him not only to write art history texts, but also to see connections between different eras and cultures. (Leonhard Lapin, “Helmi Üprus – minu vaimne ema” [Helmi Üprus – my spiritual mother], *Sirp*, October 13, 2011, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/arhitektuur/helmi-ueprus-minu-vaimne-ema/>.)

- 20 He writes: “Stylistic analysis of art nouveau showed that, due to the synthetic nature of style and architecture’s dominant position in art culture, its buildings embody a more extensive sphere than just art or architecture. In art nouveau, the conflict between natural world and man made nature, instinct and intellect, myth and reality, man and machine become incarnate; here tradition mingles with innovation, decadence with progress, beauty with ugliness, truth with lies.” Leonhard Lapin, “Arenjuooni Eesti seitsmekümnendate aastate arhitektuuris” [Developments in Estonian architecture in the 1970s], *Ehituskunst* 1 (1981): 11.
- 21 Heie Treier, *Kohalik modernsus kunstis: Eesti varamodernistliku kunsti teoreetiline ja ajalooline kontseptualiseerimine ning Karl Pärsimägi paradigmaleidmise perioodil* [Local modernity in art: the theoretical and historical conceptualization of early Estonian modernist art and Karl Pärsimägi in the period of finding the paradigm] (PhD diss., Estonian Academy of Arts, 2004), 74–75.
- 22 See for example Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: from the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 23 For example Leonhard Lapin, *Avangard* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2003); Leonhard Lapin, *Pimeydestä valoon: Viron taiteen avangarde neuvostomiehityksen aikana* [From the Darkness to the Light: Estonian artistic avant-garde during the Soviet Occupation] (Helsinki: Otava, 1996).
- 24 Andres Kurg, *Boundary Disruptions: Late-Soviet Transformations in Art, Space and Subjectivity in Tallinn, 1968–1979* (PhD diss., Estonian Academy of Arts, 2014); Andres Kurg and Mari Laanemets, eds., *Keskkonnad, projektid, kontseptsioonid. Tallinna kooli arhitektid 1972–1985 = Environment, Projects, Concepts: Architects of the Tallinn School, 1972–1985* (Tallinn: Eesti Arhitektuurimuuseum, 2008); Mari Laanemets, *Zwischen westlicher Moderne und sowjetischer Avantgarde: Inoffizielle Kunst in Estland, 1969–1978* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2011).
- 25 Mati Unt, “Libahunt karjatänaval” [Werewolf on the street], *Sirp ja Vasar*, July 19, 1983, 9.
- 26 Vilen Künnapu, “Väljavõtteid märkmikust” [Excerpts from the notebook], in *Arhitektuur: kogumik ettekandeid, artikleid, vastukajasid, dokumente ja tõlkeid uuemast arhitektuurist* [Architecture: collection of papers, articles, reactions, documents, and translations about contemporary architecture], ed. Leonhard Lapin, (manuscript. Tallinn, 1979), 11.
- 27 Leonhard Lapin, “Eesti funktsionalism” [Estonian functionalism], *Ehituskunst*, no. 2–3, (1982–1983): 84.
- 28 Leonhard Lapin, “XX sajandi arhitektuuri terminoloogilisi probleeme” [Terminological problems of 20th-century architecture], in Leonhard Lapin, *Kaks kunsti*, 106.
- 29 Leonhard Lapin “Eesti art nouveau loomus” [The Nature of Estonian Art Nouveau], in Leonhard Lapin, *Kaks kunsti*, 21.
- 30 Kodres has called Lapin, Künnapu, and the Tallinn architects of the 1970s the generation of myth-builders, as the mythic structure of architecture, manifested by way of repetitions and returns of ideas and cultural practices, held a central place in their critical architectural practices of that time. Krista Kodres, “Müüdiloojad ja teised” [Myth-builders and Others], *Ehituskunst*, 5, 1991, 3–14.
- 31 Krista Kodres, “Müüdiloojad ja teised”, 5.
- 32 Alan Colquhoun, “Modern Architecture and Its Symbolic Dimension,” in Alan Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change*. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1995), 28.
- 33 Juti Lotman, “Kirjandus ja mütolooogia” [Art and mythology], in Juti Lotman, *Kultuurisemiootika* [Cultural semiotics] (Tallinn: Olion, 1990), 338–339.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Leonhard Lapin, “Taie kujundamas keskkonda” [Art designs the environment], 23.
- 36 Leonhard Lapin, “Startinud kuuekümnendatel: Mälestusi ja mõtteid” [Started in the sixties: Memories and thoughts], *Kunst* 1 (1986), 17.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Author’s interview with Leonhard Lapin, October 31, 2014. Notes are in the author’s possession.
- 39 See for example D. K. Bernshtein, A. A. Voronov, V. L. Glazychev et al., *Arhitektura Zapada, vol. 3, Protivorechiia i poiski 60-70-kh godov* [Western Architecture, vol. 3, Contradictions and searches of the 60s and 70s] (Moscow: Strojizdat, 1983).
- 40 K. Michael Hays, *Architecture’s Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 13. In 1983, Udo Kultermann wrote in the German magazine AIT (*Architektur, Innenarchitektur, technische Ausbau*) about Vilen Künnapu’s work in terms of autonomous architecture with its own laws. Kultermann calls Künnapu’s and other Estonian young architects’ work based on local tradition “primeval”, and sees the same tendency toward autonomous architecture arising in many other countries. He compares Künnapu’s architectonic studies with Peter Eisenman’s series *Houses I–IX*. Udo Kultermann, “Zeitgenössische estnische Architektur: Die Arbeiten von Vilen Kuennapu” [Contemporary Estonian architecture: the works of Vilen Künnapu], *AIT* 2 (1983): 90–91.
- 41 K. Michael Hays, *Unprecedented Realism: The Architecture of Machado and Silvetti* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 22.
- 42 Hays, *Architecture’s Desire*, 11–12.
- 43 Andres Kurg, “Almanahh Kunst ja Kodu 1973–1980” [Art and home 1973–1980], *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture*, no. 2 (2004), 116.
- 44 Ulrike Plath, “Kadunud kuldne kese: Kuus pilti Eesti ajaloost rahvusüleses kollaažis” [Lost Golden Mean: Six Pictures on Estonian History in Transnational Collage], *Vikerkaar* 7/8 (2009), 93.
- 45 Ibid.