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CITY FORUMS – TALLINN

Changing the Way We Think

Introduction

Today, public and participatory urban planning seems self-evident, but considering how long the history of human settlements is, the phenomenon is nevertheless a very recent one. In Estonia, the layers of public urban planning are even thinner, since we only escaped a totalitarian regime less than 30 years ago. Replacing a tradition of planning by a small group of specialists with public and participatory planning can be recognised as the kind of paradigmatic shift that began in the second half of the last century and slowly gained ground in Estonia only in the late 1990s. A hundred years ago, the question of what kind of city we want and need, and the best spatial solution, was answered primarily by architects and city planners, not by geographers, sociologists, psychologists, doctors or lawyers, and even less by the public.

Public and participatory urban planning is rather a complex model of thinking and acting that can be illustrated by a DIKW pyramid, where Data, Information, Knowledge and Wisdom are

FIGURE III.6.1 Intrepid group at the Tallinn Creative Hub – converted Power Station and today's base for City Forums. Photo by Prue Chiles.

located on lower levels and decision-making at the very top. The journey from data to competent decisions needs an intertwined view from various fields, which also means involving a wide group of experts – inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, which, in turn, needs continuous development and analysis. In the city, different desires, interests and understandings cross, intertwine and collide; it is truly the Tower of Babel. There is no single answer to the question of what the city that we want and need is, as each one of us has a slightly different vision in mind and each city has its own historic context.

Urban planning is thoroughly regulated by law, both as a process and a phenomenon. In addition to formal urban planning, urban changes can be influenced also through informal discussions, activities and communication with the public. One example of such an activity is the series of Estonian City Forums, initiated by the Estonian Centre for Architecture – two-day workshops where architects, urban planners from Estonia and abroad, and experts from various related fields and representatives of interest groups and stakeholders are invited to participate. City Forums have focused on specific issues concerning urban space and have been open to everyone, and the results have been publicly presented. Since the results of the discussions are well documented, the forums captured the development and history of urban planning in Estonia.

It was crucial to approach the formal planning system with a view from outside by engaging key target groups and their representative organisations into public discussions, to inspire the participants with well-prepared argumentation and gain their support; however, at the end, experts with extensive knowledge in their field still played the most significant role. When considering solutions and alternatives in any substantial sense, it is the expert knowledge thorough research that truly matters. As the organisers of City Forums, we felt the need to move beyond the usual and ask questions such as, “How can we demand that the designed and built environment includes positive or a richness of emotions? How can we establish spatial requirements to enhance physical and mental well-being? Are these questions even relevant?”

Intuitively, the answer would be yes; however, if we really delve into it, we must admit that there are no universal answers and that, therefore, formal planning has to develop unconventional approaches. This is where a wider circle of experts can give a hand to the architects and urban planners, since they all have a unique point of view and are thus able to present supplemental arguments. When we started with City Forums, we probably did not fully understand the importance of involving a wider circle of experts and various perspectives right away. Having had the experience of bringing people together, we can now claim with confidence that discussions like those that developed during our forums are the best way to intertwine and synthesise different arguments. Today, the City Forums include architects and landscape architects, representatives of various departments of the Tallinn municipality, academics from universities, experts from research institutions, business companies and cultural organisations, and representatives of neighbourhood organisations; also, the forums are open to individual citizens.

The Narrative

The Centre for Architecture began organising City Forums in 2010, since we understood the necessity to change our mental space – the way we think in order to implement change in urban planning in Estonia. Through City Forums, public discussions could be initiated, involve a wide circle of experts and interested parties, and inspire citizens. Hubs of public space and changes that

have an impact on a large number of people are essentially often conflict zones. The community is concerned and wants to get involved; at the same time, designing public space, mobility and city planning requires extremely specific knowledge that the public does not possess. With a combination such as this, there is a danger that meaningful discussion gives way to emotions and slogan-like appeals. We witnessed that in order to avoid confrontation and prevent underdeveloped ideas from being implemented, the discussion must start as early as possible and include a diverse set of interest groups, and the most relevant ideas have to be identified through coordinated conversations.

City Forums have been conducted following a specific format. The forums are always two-day events, similar to 48-hour hackathons. The discussion always focuses on a specific issue or space and it always has a set goal that the discussions need to achieve. City Forums consist of two public sessions (at the beginning and at the end of the event) and two sessions with invited participants. During the initial discussion, the theme is opened from various perspectives. Afterwards, work continues in groups with invited experts participating. Each group has a moderator and a slightly different task. In addition to a moderator the groups are provided with help by professionals whose task is to prepare the presentations with illustrations, diagrams, images and plans to be presented at the public session concluding the City Forum.

Ideas presented at public discussions have already been often highlighted in one way or another. The task of the forums is essentially to generate completely new ideas but to rediscover previous conversations and interpret these in relevant language and form. Urban changes may take a long time, and what is being planned today may be realised after decades. Consistency is the key. For example, one of the fundamental pillars of current urban planning in Tallinn, opening the city to the sea, was first drawn on city plans after World War II, more than five decades ago. Today, this old topic is still hot. The 2010 City Forum focused on the seaside and connecting it to the city centre. Forums with a similar theme were held in 2016 (“Sea by the Main Street”), 2017 (“Open Seaside City Forum: Old City Harbour”; “Wishing for the Heart of the City”) and 2018 (“New Old City Harbour – Good Public Space”) and hopefully there are more to come.

Architect Tiit Sild, the coordinator of several City Forums and preparatory activities of the Tallinn Main Street project, wrote in 2018 in the magazine *Maja*:

“I have participated in around 10 City Forums and also been part of the preparation team, and in a way it feels as if in all cases we keep talking about a human scale, visually organised, functional and pleasant space with balanced traffic. These priorities may seem boringly similar, but the reality is that during the last 15 years we have seen a continuous but quiet, yet consistent development, involving expertise and ideas of wider interest groups, and I think we are on the cusp of shifting to a new paradigm.”

Today, we are witnessing the postponement of the construction of the Tallinn Main Street. Despite this political decision, which prevented the project from being a revolutionary step, we acknowledge its evolutionary value in future city planning.

Concluding the first City Forum in 2010, architect Tõnu Laigu admitted:

“... on private properties public interest is often cast aside; when it comes to the city’s or state’s properties, public interest is not clearly defined. People’s and/or non-profits’ initiatives are slow to take root. Space is defined by multiple thematic and zoning plans and with specific developments and constructions.”

FIGURE III.6.2 Walk through Tallinn. Photo by Prue Chiles.

Although the first City Forum took place almost a decade ago, we are faced with the fact that this conclusion would fit well in City Forum 2020 also. Still, the time and energy invested so far is not meaningless. If we compare discussions and conclusions, over time they have become considerably more detailed. In addition to repeating and rephrasing the previous statements, every new discussion has provided new knowledge and helped to circulate it.

Lessons Learned

Recently, a young colleague asked me if the pencil is still, in fact, being held by the architect/ city planner. My colleague was not sure if specialist opinions matter and if political power, money and other incomprehensible factors have perhaps not decreased the value of the expert. That this issue is still very much relevant was confirmed by a respected radio journalist in summer 2019, probably a driving enthusiast, who called for the disregarding of experts and praised the Tallinn municipality's decision to stop the Tallinn Main Street planning scheme. The journalist went on to criticise experts who saw the stopping of the project as a backwards move away from contemporary approaches to city planning.

Indeed, city planning, spatial design and the role of architects in it have changed a lot and will probably keep changing in the future as well. There is no escaping until society becomes more complex and empty space is filled and depleted. It is human nature to organise our surroundings; it is what we all want. Controlling our environment is one of our basic needs. In a shared complex space, in the city, the only way we can be successful at this is to work together. Different experts all play a

role here. The role of architects is to ask and listen to experts from related fields and then draw up a plan or design according to the best of their knowledge; although, in the end, it is still politicians who make decisions and are responsible.