READINGS ON THE EDGE
Text: Klaske Havik

'The narrative assemblage of bits and pieces [...] forces an abandonment of the idea of the reader as a passive receptor. The reader must engage, work on, rewrite [this] text. The reader must be a writer.' [1]

In *Architecture and the Text*, Jennifer Bloomer argued that there is more to reading than the passive act of consuming a story. Even though Bloomer's remark concerns a specific text, namely *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, the challenging roles of the reader might also apply to the reading of such a complex 'assemblage of bits and pieces' as a city. The approach of the Border Conditions graduate studio bears similarities to this idea of reading and (re)writing. The city, as a spatial construct, is regarded and actively perceived as a complex identity, which can be explored, engaged with and reacted upon. The encounter with complex social and spatial practices does not allow for a fixed, predetermined scope, but rather calls for a participatory, site-specific approach to spatial investigations. The idea of 'reading' the city thus means more than finding a city's story. Rather, reading is understood as allowing the different structures, fragments, activities and multiple narratives to come together in an experimental research and design process. This essay discusses the BC project initiated in the city of Tallinn. The first confrontation with the city implied a reading of different spatial and temporal elements. In the course of a year, further reflection upon these first readings resulted in an engagement with the complex identity of the city and, eventually, in a 'rewriting' of some of its sites by means of urban and architectural interventions.

Reading

'If the research was haphazard, the visit chaotic, the impressions too much to grasp, our emotions varied and awareness half-witted – the city was in complete resonance with us.' [2]

What is the best start for reading the complex spatial and temporal characteristics of Tallinn? Should one start from its historical core, one of the best preserved medieval Hanseatic cities in Europe? Should one first visit the new Museum of Occupation, a sculptural structure of concrete and glass, or take the elevator to the highest floor of one of the gleaming skyscrapers, overlooking the mushrooming towers and the Baltic Sea? Drive through the endless scenery of grey Soviet housing blocks, walk between dilapidated wooden houses and run-down factories, or, instead, order a *Café Latte* at the trendy Moscow Bar where waitresses wear fancy dresses and the young clientele is occupied with the latest mobile phone gadgets? Tallinn is a city in which many different layers of history seem to be glued on top of each other, so closely that one can almost touch medieval times, 1920s independence, Soviet features and market economy all at once. 'Now' and 'Then' are both there and in use.[3] The city, being so fragmented and continuously undergoing change, called for an intuitive, site-specific reading of various scales, picking up details and comparing characteristics of contrasting urban phenomena. The Tallinn project began with an attempt to grasp the city by moving through it at different speeds: by car, on foot, stopping intuitively at fascinating spaces and objects, searching for identities that could be revealed by maps, photographs and writings. The maps offer a series of exposures to phenomena, events and situations encountered in Tallinn's urban structure. Considering the huge impact of the 'bulldozing' forces of capitalist developments in Tallinn, it is noteworthy that these exposures were taken within a narrow time slot. They offer readings of a specific moment in time, identifying traces and starting points that might offer relevant material for future scenarios.

1 Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (s)crypts of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 13. Bloomer refers to Julia Kristeva's argument about reading as a form of participation. See also Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*, 1977.

2 From the students' afterword in the MSc3 publication *TALLINN, Border Conditions Studio*, Delft University of Technology, 2004–2005. All projects mentioned in this article have been results of the graduate studio's research on Tallinn, mentored by Micha de Haas and Klaske Havik.

3 These notes appeared earlier in: Klaske Havik, 'Tallinn: a movie scene', *MAJA Estonian Architectural Review* 2/3, 2000 (26), pp. 22–28.

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Reflecting

'*The possibility of picking up a line in the dark and trying to trace it wherever it may lead is possibly the only way of not losing oneself and thus trying to find a poetic notion that has any depth or substance. Through methods of diagramming, drawing, juxtaposing [...] each of us tried to find an entrance, a fissure in a seemingly unending limitless body.*' [4]

After some months of developing the first readings of the city by way of theory, mapping, analysis and verbal discussions, a certain continuity had been identified. The city retained its inspiring chaotic vibe, its awkward contrasts of different periods of time and scales, its surreal wastelands – but slowly all these contrasting qualities made sense. Whereas the first reading of Tallinn was influenced by the multiple speeds with which the urban setting was investigated, 'spatio-temporal' edge conditions emerged from the reflections upon these first encounters. Thus temporality became both a method of observation and a notion with which to define the urban conditions of the city. An almost invisible system of spatio-temporal edges was revealed by means of maps, photographs and writings. Intuitively, the edges where different time periods, socio-political systems and spatial structures collided, had been identified, constituting the most challenging sites for research and intervention. Such edges were sometimes very sharp and narrow, with strong visual contrasts; sometimes they consisted of larger spaces of urban wasteland.

Surprisingly, the extreme layering of spatial and temporal structures, caused by subsequent political changes, does not deprive Tallinn of a strongly defined identity. Instead, it is the very fragmentation that is currently the constant factor in Tallinn's appearance; it is the undefined state of transition that generates a very strong, but also temporal identity. In the new part of Tallinn's commercial city centre, the visibility of this superposition of time periods is most evident, and simultaneously most rapidly decreasing. It

seems that the spatio-temporal contrasts on the scale of a group of buildings, a street or a site, are quickly fading. The small cluster of old wooden houses is swiftly being erased, and probably within a few years hardly any traces of former times will be present in the commercial centre. On the larger scale of the city, fragments of different periods in history remain, clearly distinguishable as different entities within Tallinn. A clear example are the spatially and socially disconnected fragments of the city that are visible in the gaps between the commercial city quarter, the historical city centre and the 1920s residential area of Kalamaja.

The coastal zone in Tallinn is simultaneously edge and void. What used to be the flourishing Hanseatic Linna Sadam harbour – the city harbour – is now an almost desolate place, not really being part of the city's urban life. It is a leftover space from the Soviet era, a time when the entire coast was reserved for military purposes. Still, paradoxically, the coast is the port through which the majority of Tallinn's visitors arrive. Ferries from Finland bring daily shiploads of tourists and businessmen to Tallinn. Finnish tourists drag their shopping carts bursting with cheap alcohol through the now desolate wasteland. The barren harbour seems to be allowing for a limitless alcohol abuse, where tourists can ceaselessly explore their personal boundaries of intoxication.

Identifying these spatio-temporal edges provides insight into the way social and political developments cause huge spatial confrontations, not only between scales, materials and styles but also in the ways the public space of the city is being used. It became clear that public urban spaces were either overregulated or totally neglected. Examples of the latter can be found in the wasteland around the harbour or in the open spaces between the large Soviet housing blocks. Since the apartments have been privatized and the community no longer has any responsibility for maintenance, the open spaces have been taken over by informal use, natural forces and waste. Examples of overregulated public space can be found in the

historic city centre, which has almost reached the status of an open-air museum, completely geared towards the tourist industry. It is now the domain of tourists, where one can hardly speak of urban life of the inhabitants themselves. The heated outdoor terraces of Raekoja Square, even on cold days crowded with tourists wearing hats and gloves, become reminiscent of a ski resort.

The question is whether such urban spaces can still be called public, if indeed public life can only exist with the presence of a diversity of peoples. Assuming Richard Sennett's claim that what constitutes a public realm is a contact between diverse, complex social groups where the possibility of meeting strangers is facilitated,[5] the public character of Tallinn's urban spaces becomes questionable. During the building boom of the past decade, the design of public space has escaped attention – largely because the building projects have mainly been developed by private companies. The lack of urban planning in Tallinn, or more precisely the lack of municipal power in the capitalist run on building ground, threatens the possibility of public urban life in the city. City politicians and urban planners have hardly had any influence on building developments. This situation has already resulted in some drastic and dramatic mistakes in Tallinn. Viru Square, formerly known as one of the largest urban squares in Tallinn, has made place for an enormous building complex containing, among other things, a bus station and a shopping centre.

The edges in particular, e.g. the Rotermann area situated in between the old city and the business district or the neglected coastal area, offer potential for realizing a meaningful public domain in Tallinn. The spatial qualities of these areas can precisely be found in their edge condition and marginality, which seem to cater for social minorities. These edges offer the possibility to simultaneously enhance contrasting qualities and connect different fragments by means of providing public urban space. Tallinn should develop these sites in such a way that marginal qualities will be revealed and turned into urban potentials, grounded in local specificities. Here lies an opportunity for creating public urban spaces that would help to define Tallinn, not simply as a medieval theme park or the commercial Manhattan of the Baltics, but as a city where daring architectural and urban interventions take place.

Rewriting

'*Can we turn these dreams into paper, models and replications of our new reality, expressions of the line we once took up?*' [6]

The Tallinn project set out to discover urban conditions and develop related architectural strategies that would not deny the edge conditions but activate its contrasting qualities. A key issue in all the investigative analyses and design tasks was to allow for a more *public* space in a city where the current developments turn increasingly towards the private. The challenge this project puts forward is to achieve complex programmes that activate the public space precisely within the in-between areas of Tallinn's edges. Some proposed designs do take a protective point of view, embracing, as it were, layers of time that are likely to be forgotten and opening them up for public use. This has resulted in designs that integrate the old wooden buildings, buildings that would otherwise be demolished, or in designs that attract public life to the leftover spaces, the unused edges between different urban entities, by combining public facilities with housing. The edge conditions can be intensified by focusing on the transitions between public and private, using a series of interconnecting courtyards from which different programmes can be accessed, and offering shortcuts from one part of the city to another. Not only unoccupied urban places can generate such interventions. Large built structures like the 1980s limestone Linnahall building, with its accessible roof, offer opportunities for providing meaningful, publicly accessible urban spaces.

In other proposed interventions, specific private programmes have been developed to facilitate an additional public or semi-public space which can be utilized by different social groups. These strategies achieve a multiple use of the available square metres, making the interventions both financially feasible and socially meaningful. In that sense, the edges where the forces of commercialization and neglect converge, can be seen as opportunities for exchange. By superimposing a range of programmatic impulses, while leaving spaces open for marginal use and appropriation, a diversity of spaces, goods and social exchange at different levels can be achieved. The combination of commercial

4   From the students' afterword in the MSc3 publication *TALLINN, Border Conditions Studio*, Delft University of Technology, 2004–2005.

5   Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London/NY: Penguin books, 2002 [1977]).

6   From the students' afterword in the MSc3 publication *TALLINN, Border Conditions Studio*, Delft University of Technology, 2004–2005.

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programmes and public facilities generates social activity for the relatively poor inhabitants living in the run-down quarters of the city, while the additional programmes attract other visitors as well.[7] The strategy of spatial appropriation by different users could also be applied to the wastelands on Tallinn's periphery. A number of the proposed projects departed from a detailed analysis of local structures, traces or activities and resulted in the pursuit of a strategy of urban acupuncture. This proposed urban acupuncture approach entailed offering flexible structures or series of events, aimed at generating social activities in otherwise desolate areas.[8] The responsive strategies for the urban phenomena encountered in Tallinn all have something in common: they have identified spatio-temporal edges as sites with a potential for a 'public realm'. Furthermore, site-specific qualities are explicitly enhanced in order to facilitate interaction between the inhabitants of Tallinn and their environment. Surprisingly, none of the projects propose a public space as such. The strategy of providing public space within private or semi-private programmes seems a more appropriate answer to the questions of public realm in a city where not only the land but also the processes have rapidly become extremely privatized.

The critical potential of reading and misreading

'[...] and in its interwoven and colliding geometrics, its incorporation of familiar, old materials and entities and fragments, its various connections, and its ambiguous signification it contains an intricate architectonic [...] It is an allegorical work, a multi-layered palimpsest, bits and pieces of previous and succeeding texts read through other texts.'[9]

Could this description of the complexities of *Finnegans Wake* also be attributed to the city

of Tallinn? Apparently, with its multi-layered and fragmented, collage-like character, its incorporation of old and new, its ambiguity, the city might resemble such an allegorical work. Jennifer Bloomer refers to Walter Benjamin's idea of the allegorical 'as being fragmentary, ambiguous, palimpsestic, and hieroglyphic. For him, allegory involves misreading and is therefore potentially critical.'[10]

This idea of the critical potential of reading and even misreading is an essential principle for the Border Conditions group. The research and design projects were conducted with the explicit acknowledgement of the naivety of the outsider's view, realizing that it was impossible to know the city in its totality. As Gaston Bachelard has claimed, this not-knowing could in fact be regarded as a form of knowledge: 'Knowing must [...] be accompanied by an equal capacity to forget knowing. Not-knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge.'[11] Bachelard holds that the capacity to both know and not-know is a quality of poets. It implies the capacity of being at once receptive to the unexpected and of conducting a critical analysis of these observations. The city of Tallinn turned out to be an exemplary location for such an approach. Its very character of ambiguity and change seemed to welcome the curiosity of scholars and students looking for surprise, while questions such as the collision of spatio-temporal edges and the issue of public space called for critical analysis. Moreover, the issues addressed in Tallinn initiated a discussion about the limits and definitions of the profession. Could the moral idea of public space as a Western ideal be imposed on the spatial realities found? Or could the ambiguity of Tallinn's urban spaces broaden our understanding of public space? As the students stated themselves, when they were about to start with their designs: 'Maybe the only answer is to plunge into the depth once more, revisit and re-establish all our prejudices.'[12]

7   See: *Russian Market*, project by Max Rink, on page 052 of this book. This project has been awarded first prize in both the Archiprix 2007 and the Archiprix International 2009 competition.

8   See: *Tallinn's Edge*, project by Lizet Blenke, on page 134 of this book.

9   Bloomer, ibid, p. 12.

10 Ibid, p. 137.

11 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, Mass., 1994 [1964]), p. XXXIII.

12 From the students' afterword in the MSc3 publication *TALLINN, Border Conditions Studio*, Delft University of Technology, 2004–2005.

Bert Vording's **research concentrated on the mapping of different layers of architectural history in the new commercial centre of Tallinn. The photograph shows the chaotic appearance, caused by built fragments of different political periods, as the current identity of Tallinn.**

Niels Tilanus **characterized the coastal zone as an area of transition. His map shows the number of tourists arriving at the ferry terminals and tracks the routes they tend to take through the wasteland to supermarkets or bars in the city centre.**
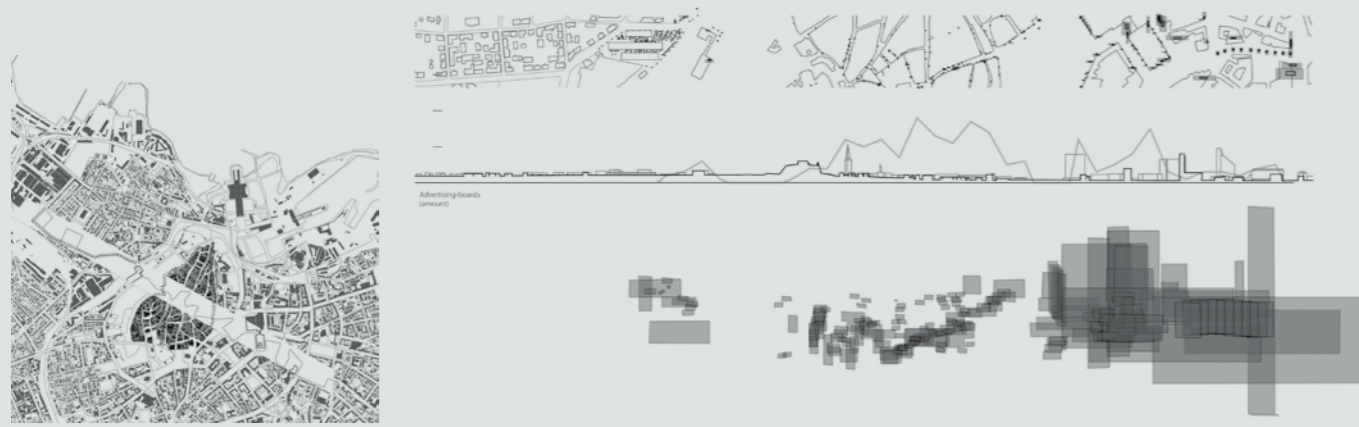
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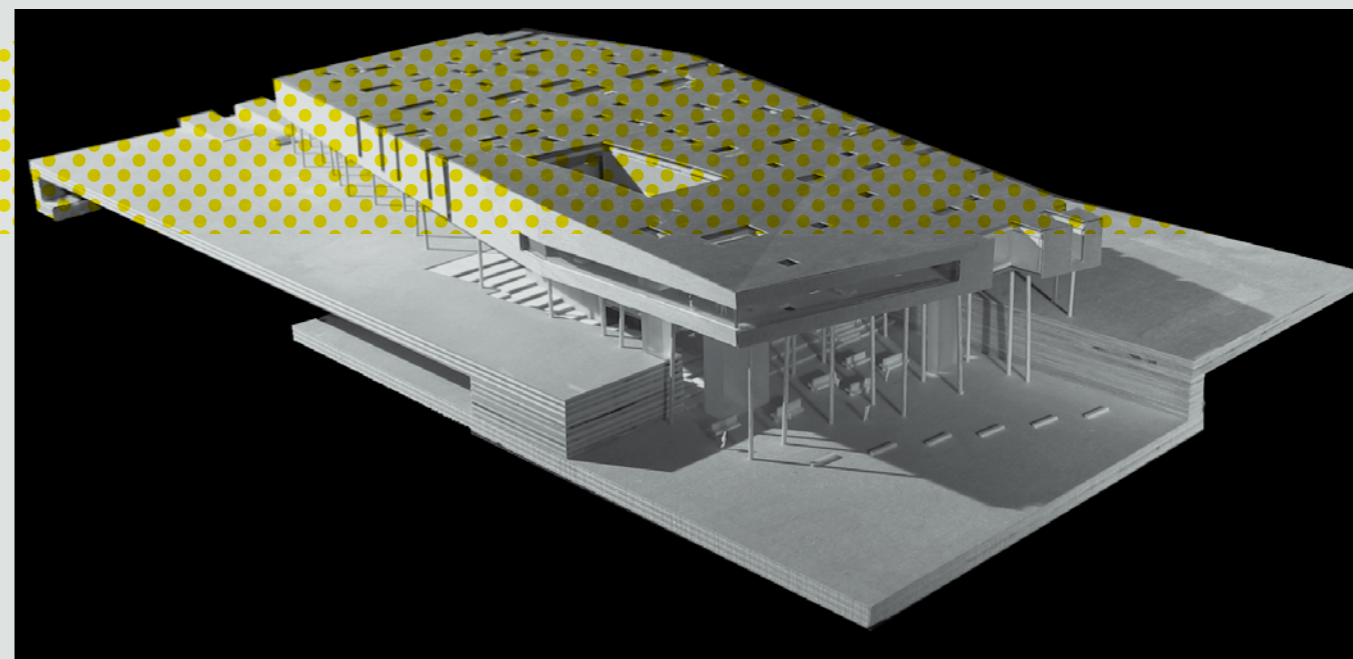
The hotel that Laheij **designed close to the railway station is lifted above a square that simultaneously functions as a bus platform and a large open public space.**
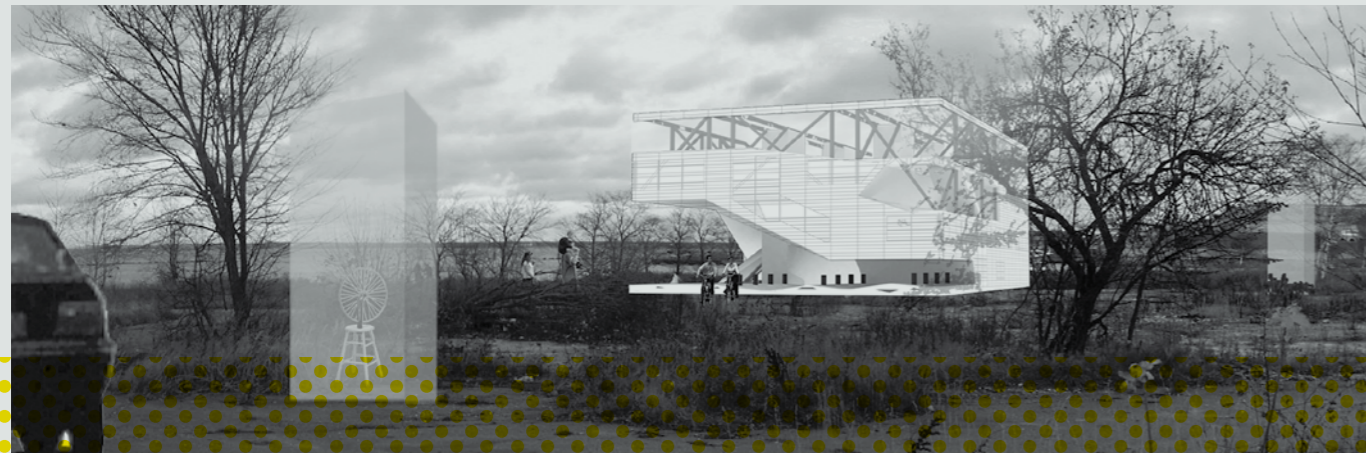
Sander Laheij **projected a strip on central Tallinn, crossing the commercial city quarter, the historical city centre and the 1920s residential area Kalamaja. By mapping the intensity of control, advertising, traffic and tourism, he investigated the specific manner in which the phenomenon of capsularization manifests itself in Tallinn.**

Klaas Kresse **injected the current wasteland of Linna Harbour with small displays and larger cultural buildings. The site becomes a surreal cultural park representing the stratified character of Tallinn, and offers different views ranging from surreal moonscapes to contemporary architecture.**
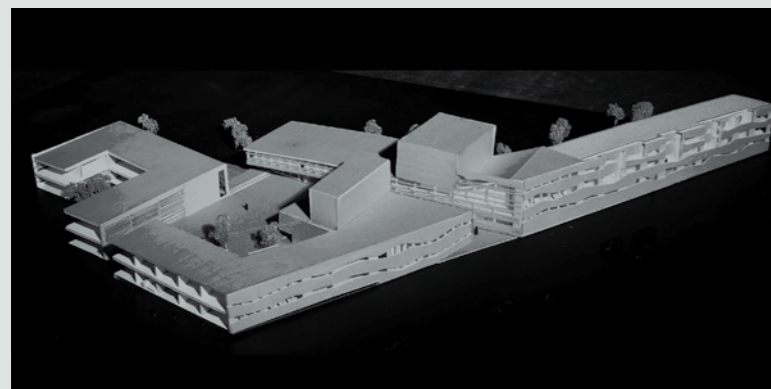
Aukje Litjens **investigated the potential of the Rotermann site as a mediator between harbour, commercial city centre and the historical city centre of Tallinn. Her composition attracts public life to the area by combining theatre facilities with housing. A series of connected courtyards from which different programmes can be accessed, offers shortcuts from one part of the city to another.**

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**BERLIN
LIÈGE
SINGAPORE
ISTANBUL
MAASTRICHT
MARSEILLE**