

**Who belongs to the
canon of Estonian
architecture?**

A Room
of
One's
Own

**What would
an egalitarian
space**

**be like? Does
space affect
gender roles?**

Feminist's

**Is urban
planning**

Questions

masculine?

to Architecture

Who belongs to the canon of Estonian architecture?

How do we form beliefs about who and what is important in Estonian architecture? How do beliefs about the most important milestones in our architectural history and the key names in contemporary spatial design establish themselves? A canon – essentially a set of normative beliefs – evolves from a series of individual decisions and choices that start to support and reinforce each other as they cumulate. The canon of architectural history evolves from

choices about whose work should be gathered into museum collections and archives, which works to exhibit, whom to write monographs and research articles about, which examples to build national or regional narratives around, who is awarded prizes and honorary titles, recognised as opinion leaders in their field or interviewed in the media, and so on.

There are only a few women in the canon of Estonian architecture. The reason is not that there are fewer women than men in architecture in general. While a predominantly male profession before World War II, with there being only two certified female architects – Erika Nõva and Salme Liiver – in Estonia, the numbers of male and female architecture students were roughly equal during the Soviet period and women in fact significantly outnumbered men in the 1970s. The same trend has continued in recent decades. Yet we find very little work by female architects in museum collections and permanent exhibitions, in refer-

ence books on 20th century architecture or even the decades since Estonia regained its independence, as well as very few women having solo exhibitions or as the subject of monographs. If the lack of visibility in the media and absence of universally recognised opinion leaders is considered a problem for architects in general, it is even rarer for female architects in particular to occupy such positions. The disproportionality of gender representation increases as we move up in the professional hierarchy. While nearly half of the members of the Estonian Association of Architects are women, only 17 per cent of the holders of the highest level of professional qualification are women, and during the last 23 years only five women have been awarded the Estonian Cultural Endowment's main prize for architecture, the highest recognition in the field.



Architecture students of the Tallinn Technical School with professor Artur Perna. Salme Liiver in the middle. Photo Museum of Estonian Architecture.



Eil Väärtnõu. Põlva hospital, 1972–1976, built 1977–1980. Photo Museum of Estonian Architecture.

The stereotypical view is that female architects are better at creating spaces for living, nurturing and caring – private homes and apartment buildings, kindergartens and schools, hospitals, spas and holiday homes. Feminist research into architectural history in the West tends to confirm these preconceptions; at least in the 20th century, women have found it easier to receive commissions in these areas, and there has been less questioning of their competence with such building types. Soviet architecture was produced under different conditions: architects were gathered into large design organisations where projects were just assigned internally or, with the most prominent buildings, through competitions. According to architects who were active at the time, there was generally no discrimination based on building types. Therefore we find industrial buildings, transport infrastructure, agricultural facilities and administrative buildings as well as the more likely holiday homes, hospitals, restaurants and cafés designed by women. On the other hand, slightly more schools and kindergartens came from the drawing boards of women architects and women also outnumbered men in urban planning, which allowed for less self-expression during that period. However, there is one type of building in Soviet-era Estonian architecture which does indicate a distinct under-representation of women – large public buildings, the most prestigious outlet for the profession and one that generally also allowed for more creativity. These commissions were either assigned directly or acquired by winning a competition, as was the case with the Ugala theatre building, which established the careers of the architects Irina Raud and Inga Orav.

Nor can we say that spaces designed by women are somehow different. Although internationally some practitioners and theoreticians have described the essential qualities of female architecture as including a sense of closure or protection, curved, arched and nest-like forms, a focus on interconnecting interior and exterior spaces, flexible rooms and intentionally complex layouts, few share this view today. The overall situation in Estonian architecture also confirms that creative choices are influenced primarily by the aesthetic and social beliefs of the era and that gender identity, if it has a role at all, only enters into a project indirectly – although a gender-centred interpretation is not unwarranted as an additional level in a few cases.

What stereotypes are associated

with the work of female architects?

Who is the author if architecture

During the first half of the 20th century, most architects would personally complete their designs from start to finish. Today, however, architectural space is the product of primarily collaborative efforts made by a number of people at various stages of the project: engineers, contractors, construction supervisors, owners, users and others parties, as well as the architect's own staff. At the same time, the idea of architecture as an artwork with a clearly identifiable creative individual behind it persists. The idea of the architect as a creative genius is reaffirmed and supported by the way in which the profession communicates itself to the broader public; the credibility of the whole profession is largely based on the reputation of the architect as an independent, individualist creator. Moreover, architecture is a very competitive profession. The singular "face of the architect" is also needed by the award system, which generally highlights the extraordinary achievements of extraordinary people, carrying on the heroic narrative of Western culture. And the archetypical hero, of course, is male.

is a collaborative effort?

Down the years, many female architects have chosen partnerships with male architects, often their husbands, as the vehicle for self-realisation. In some cases this means creative collaboration as equals; if less lucky, the woman goes to historical annals as a supporting act alongside the man as the main architect. In retrospect, it is admittedly difficult to clearly identify the respective contributions in collaborative projects such as those of Erika Nõva and Alar Kotli, Heili and August Volberg, Ado and Niina Eigi, Raine Karp and Riina Altmäe, or Ell Väärtnõu and Andres Ringo. Increasingly commonplace since the late 1990s, the practice of using brand names, rather than personal names, in the names of architectural firms testifies to an increased recognition of collaboration and shared contributions. Some have also experimented with female-only architectural partnerships – aiming for either a more suitable working environment, more flexible work arrangements or different architectural solutions.



Marika Lõoke, Jüri Okas.
Merekodu residential district
in Vääna-Jõesuu, design
2004, completed 2011.
Photo Tiit Veermäe.

**ÜÜRIDA RUUM NAISELE.
LÄBIKÄIDAV, VIIE UKSEGA, 25,5 M²
ROTERMANNI KVARTALIS.
ADDRESS AHTRI 2, 10151 TALLINN
VAATAMA SAAB TULLA
K-P KL 11-18
TÄPSEMAD TINGIMUSED KOHAPEAL.**

What is a space for a woman like, and where might such a space be? Flo Kasearu's site-specific work is inspired by a pre-defined spatial situation: a 26 square metre walk-through room with five doors. It is a commentary on an archetypal situation where a woman has no right or opportunity to have a space of her own — her ability to occupy space is contingent and dependent on the circumstances. The fact that spatial relations require adaptations and agreements that are not usually considered important enough to define is emphasised by a standard marriage contract where “property” is replaced with the word “space”. This agreement, which defines spatial relations, presents the rules, norms, and legal discourse in terms of the most everyday, basic level of (co)habitation, such as the right and inevitability of a body to be in a space. As the work opens up a possibility to rent out the space while the exhibition is on, the work also reaches out of the museum into the public space, and the exhibition has a potential to mix with reality — the work provides an opportunity for an interested woman to inhabit, use and adapt these 26 walk-through square metres according to her needs and wishes.

Since antiquity, the human body has been the measure of good architecture; its proportions have been the basis of what is perceived as a harmonious and comfortable space. Pursuing rationality, harmonisation and standardisation, modernism was even more systematic in its attempts to design economical and functional spaces based on the average parameters of the human body; probably the most comprehensive and influential example of this is still Ernst Neufert's *Bauentwurfslehre (Architects' Data)*. Originally published in 1936, with 39 revised editions having appeared since, it was intended as a handbook of standard measurements and spatial guidelines for architects. Since the 1970s, however, feminist critics have pointed out that such spatial standardisation is based on male proportions. By default, the man is the measure of architecture — and the same goes for product design. The “human scale” often means roughly 1.8 metres.

However, biological sex and related physical differences are far from being the only or even the most important basis of distinction. Intersectional feminism emphasises that a series of identity categories, such as age, gender, wealth, nationality and race, health, sexual orientation or family choices, intertwine in everyday experience, including spatial experience, and the various marginalising aspects are mutually reinforcing. Neither “women” nor “men” are a homogeneous mass with the same spatial experiences and needs. An egalitarian space should address the needs of all user groups equally. The starting point is universal design: if space is designed with the least capable users in mind, it can be expected to be suitable for everyone. Although the movement originally sought solutions and accessibility for the elderly and disabled, the ultimate aim is the adaptation of space to the needs of marginal users as a self-evident norm in our environment as a whole, instead of viewing such users as requiring special solutions.

What would an egalitarian space be like?

Siiri Vallner, Indrek Peil (design team Kaire Nõmm, Kadri Klementi, Andro Mänd, Ragnar Põllukivi, Sten-Mark Mändmaa). Social housing unit for people with difficulties in coping. 2010–2012. Photo Paco Ulman.



Display authors:
Laura Linsi,
Roland Reemaa

Farm kitchen
based on a
drawing by Nigul
Espe published
in the magazine
Taluperenaine.
Model by Laura
Linsi, Roland
Reemaa.



Modernisation affected all aspects of human life. One of the most significant changes was the intrusion of the culture of experts into the private sphere; the home, too, was to be run according to scientific principles, as decisions that used to be purely personal would now be affected by the opinions and recommendations of household management experts, officials, healthcare professionals and other experts. Household management took on a whole new meaning and the role of the woman as the manager of this new unit emerged as a kind of profession. A rationally organised and clean home was considered a sign of civilisation; home improvement was presented as a woman's civic duty. Housekeeping also began to be seen as a more wide-reaching project that could be extended to the social level; women's associations used household management as an ideology that gave them a voice in the public sphere. One vehicle for these aims was the written word. Among the output of the numerous women's associations that operated in Estonia during the 1920s and 1930s was the publication of various handbooks and guides. One of the most popular publications in Estonia was the periodical *Taluperenaine* (The Country Wife) with about 30,000 readers. Its mission was to report on rural life and give practical advice, but it also addressed social issues, such as city-country relations or the roles of men and women, and promoted new art and culture. As the target group for *Taluperenaine* – a lifestyle magazine of its day – women were seen as the initiators of the modernisation of the living environment and way of life. They were the ones to adapt the ideal environments as seen in the magazines to the everyday households.

Women's magazines continued to have a similar mission during the Soviet period. The most active promoter of a modern living environment was the almanac *Kunst ja kodu* (Art and Home), which also focused on very practical advice and detailed working drawings that systematically addressed all the different aspects and details of households over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. The instructive articles and model solutions were contributed by the top designers and interior architects of the time – once again the private sphere was to be reorganised according to a professional aesthetic. At the same time, the instructions dovetailed with the specific DIY culture of the Soviet era. Contemporary women's magazines now offer fewer practical DIY instructions, but their role in shaping lifestyle choices and aesthetic preferences about the spatial environment is as significant as ever; it is just that consumer decisions are now the principal means of self-expression.

in the modernisation of space?



Annelinn in Tartu.
Photo by Andres
Tarto.

Modernist urban planning was based on functional zoning – the separation of living, working, leisure and transport. A standardised city called for standardised ways of life. With Khrushchev's reforms in the 1950s, ideas from international modernism were established as Soviet norms, but with even less variability. The populist goal of ensuring each family their own living space translated into extremely frugal housing standards. Also, the shopping and service facilities for the new 'micro-districts' were never built. Contributing equally at work while also fulfilling the traditional role of housewife, women bore a double load in Soviet society. For them, the zoned city meant unreasonably long distances between home, work, school, kindergarten, grocery store, dry-cleaning etc, while the men's commuting between home and work fitted in more naturally with the city's transport logic. The cyclically used mono-functional areas largely lacked a public function, were sparsely populated or poorly lit, and were often perceived as unsafe by women in particular.

The 1990s infatuation with suburbs displays the same modernist planning logic. The peri-urban environment created by the politically and economically supported ideal of a private home is equally monofunctional and perpetuates traditional gender roles even more. Advocated as child-friendly, the suburban house required more housework and was much more likely to lead to a family model with a stay-at-home mother. Its financing mechanisms and a car-centered lifestyle, in combination with the policy of maternity pay that prevents part-time work, put mothers in a position where they were dependent in more ways than one. The peri-urban environment is also homogeneous with residents with similar financial backgrounds and children of the same age; people who are sick or dependent on care, single residents and others with lifestyles that diverge from the norm are segregated.

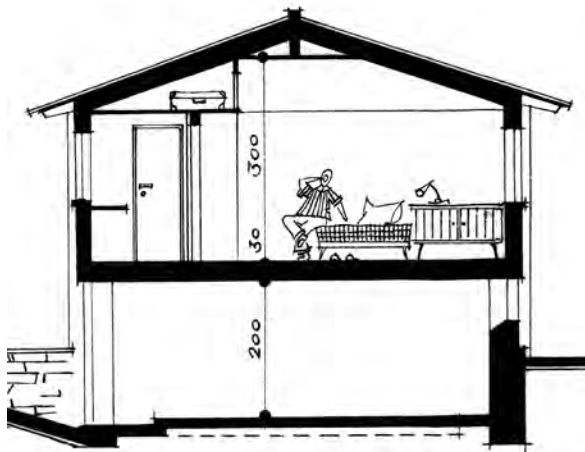
Feminist architects have criticised the methods of planning from the 1970s already. By today, negotiating with neighbourhoods and 'translating' official planning discourse to the commons have become widespread tools of participatory planning. Such ideas have reached Estonia as part of a general change of mentality without ever acknowledging their feminist roots.

Is urban planning

masculine?

How does the home affect gender roles and social relationships?

Housing was a central theme in 20th-century architecture. In the early days of modernism, it was believed that a new person and new kinds of social relations would be forged by reorganising housing. A century later, the home is a status symbol and a form of social capital. Looking at the evolution of housing, we see how ideas about the essence of the home and the relationships between the inhabitants have changed. The arrangement of rooms shows whether the dwelling fulfils only basic functions, is also intended for social life or is mixed with a work environment; whether the home is inhabited by a nuclear family or whether the living standard also requires service staff; who has privacy in the home and how much, and so on. Similarly, typical gender roles are also reflected in the arrangement of space. As masculinity and femininity are not part of human nature, but social roles inculcated and adopted through repeated behavioural patterns, their development is also affected by the way in which the spaces that surround us shape our behaviour. Leslie Kanen Weisman writes: "From the master bedroom to the head of the table, the 'man of the house/breadwinner' is afforded places of authority, privacy (his own study), and leisure (a hobby shop, a special lounge chair). A homemaker has no inviolable place of her own. She is attached to spaces of service. She is a hostess in the living room, a cook in the kitchen, a mother in the children's room, a lover in the bedroom, a chauffeur in the garage."



Henno Sepmann. Private house of Valve Pormeister. Section, 1958 (?). Museum of Estonian Architecture.

The home seems to be one of the most tradition-bound areas of architecture. The functional separation of rooms is clearer in high-class dwellings, such as villas; standard apartments with a minimum floor area, on the other hand, reveal a very normative understanding of the

composition of households and distribution of roles. Despite profound changes in social conditions and standards of acceptable behaviour over the last century, the spatial layout of houses and apartments has changed remarkably little.

The suburban home, regardless of whether it is a catalogue house or bespoke architecture, is the stalwart of conventional spatial arrangement, with the living room, dining room and kitchen making up the public area and the (married) couple's bedroom and children's rooms making up the private area. If there is a study, the rule is to have no more than one. Compared to this homogeneous (co)habitation model, all other kinds of unions and needs appear as deviations, be it single mothers or gay couples, households comprising several generations or committed loners, couples where both work from home, or communes of kindred spirits.

Is female to male as nature is to culture? This provocative question was already posed in the 1970s, but the essentialist attitude – as if women somehow had a more direct relationship with everything natural – still persists. In architecture, this attitude is usually channelled into the idea of organic design, which is often seen as a feminine, more sensitive approach. It also lies behind the assumption that landscape architecture is essentially a discipline for women. When describing the work of Estonia's undoubtedly most celebrated female architect Valve Pormeister as organic, this keyword is used precisely to refer to her particular way of combining dynamic volumes and related landscape patterns, which is romantically seen as the core of her feminine way of doing things differently. This may seem to be supported by the fact that Pormeister was educated as a landscape architect and therefore began as an outsider, although the international models and analogues of the so-called organic modernism that she represents have nothing at all to do with femininity or the female position.

Do women create more organic architecture and what is that anyway?

In fact, organic architecture is what they call a floating signifier, which has a very broad and variable meaning. Today, the focus of organic architecture as an approach that seeks harmony between building and nature has shifted from formal problems to sustainability. Here too, feminine allusions are not absent; according to ecofeminists, female consumers make more sustainable choices, are more motivated by conservation and focused on the sparing use of resources. Do women design more sustainable architecture? More than anything else this is another unsubstantiated stereotype, although it must be admitted that the requirements of sustainability continue to be seen as an obstacle to creativity in the rather masculine architectural culture of Estonia. There have not been enough resources, knowledge or clients for high-tech solutions, and low-tech solutions are regarded as vernacular architecture, so that environmentally responsible architecture remains in the margins.



Karin Bachmann, Mirko Traks, Henn Runnel (Kino). Estonian National Museum outdoor areas, 2010–2016. Photo Anna-Liisa Urz

Feminist architectural research has questioned the way professionalism is defined in architecture. What are considered proper objects of study or criticism? What deserves to be distinguished as architecture in the first place? These debates began with the controversy over architecture as the work of an individual creator and the role of the user as the co-creator and transformer of the built environment. As a result, attention shifted to the ordinary, everyday, vernacular and improvised, alongside unique buildings. In connection with this

process of re-establishing the value of the private sphere, the study of the history of interiors – traditionally associated with female designers and users – has increased as an independent discipline. The desire to include marginalised areas of self-expressions has also brought into focus a range of other non-mainstream aesthetics and amateur practices, which are not easy to bring under one definition. How to approach naïve architecture, traditional vernacular construction or improvised conversions? How can we define architecture so as not to exclude marginal practices?



Jim Self, Maarja Ounaste: Eco-hostel in Lahemaa, 2013–2017. Photo: Sten Roosvald.

Does masculinity define professionalism in architecture?

A room and money of her own – these are two prerequisites for a woman’s self-fulfilment, so wrote Virginia Woolf almost 90 years ago. Despite this, Estonian architectural culture still seems to be completely unaware of the fact that space can also be a feminist issue. Yet feminism provides a methodology and approach that allows us to raise a wide range of questions and to see the history of Estonian architecture in the 20th century as well as contemporary practices and ways of using space in a completely different light. That is also the main purpose of the exhibition – to provide a critical and polemical tool, a means to spark discussion, rather than a place for presenting ready-made research results or pronouncing final judgements. To open up avenues for further research and discuss positions from which to reflect on architecture. The exhibition throws up nine questions about the specificities of architectural education and the development of the canon of Estonian architecture, the stereotypes and prejudices related to the work of women architects, the role expectations embodied in public urban space and housing, as well as spatial equality and the needs of marginal users. In interviews, practising architects from different generations share their experiences and views on these topics.

**A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN.
FEMINIST’S QUESTIONS
TO ARCHITECTURE**

Exhibition at the Museum
of Estonian Architecture
25.01.–19.05.2019

Curator: Ingrid Ruudi
Special guests: Flo Kasearu,
Laura Linsi, Roland Reemaa;
Assistants: Jarmo Kauge,
Tiiu Parbus (1930s)
Spatial design: Katrin Koov
Graphic design: Laura Pappa

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projekt, Inphysica Technology, Kaos
architects, Kavakava, Kino landscape

architects, Museum of Estonian
Architecture, National Archives
of Estonia, Estonian Healthcare
Museum, Salto AB, archives of the
Tallinn Urban Planning Department,
archives of Tallinn School No 21,
TalTech museum; Reio Avaste,
Inke-Brett Eek, Kaido Haagen, Mari
Hunt, Krista Karu, Karli Luik, Arne
Maasik, Oliver Moosus, Hanna-
Liisa Mõtus, Kersti Nigols, Jüri
Okas, Toomas Paaver, Brit Pavelson
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Giuseppe Provenzano, Irina Raud,
Sten Roosvald, Tõnis Saadoja, Sigrid
Saarep, Martin Siplane, Nele Šverns,
Andres Tartto, Karri Tiigisoon,
Maris Tomba, Leena Torim, Liis
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