

## **ABSTRACT**

Estonia, smallest of the Baltic states, is often heralded as a success story when it comes to transition from a command to market economy. Yet, in Estonia's remarkable evolution from socialism to democracy and the free-market, urbanization has witnessed sweeping changes – not all of which are laudable. With the withdrawal of Soviet occupation, city building is less centrally controlled. Not surprisingly, the public realm is shrinking, and suburbanization and strip retailing colonize urban peripheries. Historic urban fabrics are simultaneously upgraded to attract tourism.

This paper will discuss the complexly layered narratives of the Estonian city. Estonia has been, until recently, under near-continual domination by Denmark, Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Russia, due to its geo-political position on the maritime trade route between the West and Russia. Estonia today is influenced by the elegantly sober urban and architectural forms of Scandinavia. This paper will also review Estonia's contested urban territories, which result from processes of political, fiscal and administrative decentralization, privatization and market development. The bottlenecks of land reform will also be outlined. After discussing issues in general terms, this paper will then focus on a recent strategic urban design project for an eastern extension of the city of Pärnu, a secondary city and the country's 'summer capital'.

The Pärnu case study is emblematic of the spatial, environmental and programmatic challenges in present-day urban Estonia. Located at the confluence of the Pärnu River and Pärnu Bay on the Baltic Sea, the city attracts tourists with its beaches, bustling summer events, fresh air, mud baths, and relative provinciality. With 45,000 residents, Pärnu is only about a tenth of the size of Estonia's largest city; yet Pärnu attracts 400,000 visitors each summer. Although Pärnu experiences extraordinary fluctuations in its population due to heavy summer tourism, the small city nevertheless represents issues typical of post-Soviet Estonian urbanism and planning. The urban history of Pärnu has seen upheavals and subsequent recovery. The case study project was the winning entry for an international competition. The site is strategic in the urban context, and the project addressed the interface between urban planning, architecture, and landscape ecology, mediating among various scales and conflicting interests (local vs. tourist, public realm vs. private development). The Pärnu case study project put forth an urban design agenda, being more inclusive than the design of objects as such. Urban design and strategic urban projects prioritize public benefit and the shaping of the public realm. However, throughout the world, the role of urban design is sometimes marginalized as urban form follows financial and development priorities. The proposed project in Pärnu represents the difficulties and pressures of un-developed sites within

Estonian cities; its status remains ambiguous and in Estonia, urban design has yet to prove its post-Soviet relevancy.