



Forecasting the Future, Recycling the Past: Two Exhibitions in Tallinn

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A double review of the exhibitions *Forecast and Fantasy: Architecture without Borders, 1960s–1980s*, curated by Andres Kurg and Mari Laanemets, 20 January–30 April 2023, and *Urban Stocks: Spolia Returns*, curated by Laura Linsi and Roland Reemaa, 25 May–30 July 2023) held at the Estonian Museum of Architecture in Tallinn. The two exhibitions explore how architects in and beyond Estonia thought and think about the future and historic fabric of cities.

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In spring 2023, the Museum of Architecture in Tallinn staged two exhibitions. The first, *Forecast and Fantasy: Architecture without Borders, 1960s–1980s*, addressed the history of experimental visions and scientific forecasting in postwar architecture. The second, *Urban Stocks: Spolia Returns*, considered the potential of reusing old building materials as a way of making design practice more resource aware. Looking at the two exhibitions side-by-side reveals their shared departure point: the role of crisis and future imagination in architecture.

When we attend the first exhibition, our group takes a long detour around a series of construction sites that envelop the museum. As the municipality and real estate developers vie for control over Tallinn, we are made aware of a history when the future was seen through socialist eyes. *Forecast and Fantasy* opens with the Finnish architect Kirmo Mikkola's neoconstructivist collage *Goodbye, Futurology!* (1970), which introduces the exhibition's focus on forecasting and fantasizing as two modes of future orientation. We learn about a long-running exchange between Mikkola and his Estonian colleagues that centered on what curator Andres Kurg, in a private conversation, describes as their shared interest in developing "a different kind of Left". Kurg and Mari Laanemets, art historians by training, have collaborated on a number of projects related to Estonian experimental architecture. Here they examine Estonians' exchanges with their Nordic, Russian and Baltic colleagues, their engagement with architecture and future in Czechoslovakia, Romania, and other Eastern European countries, and their parallel interests in Western architecture.



Figure 1: *Forecast and Fantasy: Architecture without Borders, 1960s–1980s*. Installation view. Photo: Evert Palmets.

Organized around five key themes, the exhibit-packed rooms immerse us in the socialist universe (**Figure 1**). “The City as a Stage” focuses on critical responses to mass-produced architecture and the tedium of urban life as manifested in the satirical drawings of the Hungarian architect László Rajk and the Czech architectural collective DNA that echo those by the Italian collective Superstudio. “The End of Work,” too, spans the capitalist-socialist divide: the notion that cybernetic automation would free up everyone’s time for self-realization inspired a range of interventions from neo-organicist approaches to socialist city planning (the Russian collective NER) to performative and sensorial engagements with the urban everyday (the Slovenian collective OHO). “Romantic Beginnings” explores the role of magic and mysticism, an interest that was particularly strong among Estonian architects such as Vilen Künnapu. In “Entropy” we encounter drawings and installations driven by a curiosity about marginal spaces and discarded materials, while “Replies from Outer Space” looks at the significance of cosmology and planetary thinking. Especially captivating is the intricate 1973 project *Terra X: An Idea of Total Urbanization of the World* by the Polish architect Stefan Müller (while representation of Slovak artist Július Koller’s work on the UFO phenomenon is markedly absent).

The captivating exhibition design by Kaisa Sööt strikes a balance between organizing the space according to the five thematic clusters and ensuring that the space is visually connected so that the visitor never loses sight of the exhibition as a whole. The bold monochromatic colors and elementary shapes used as basic building blocks for the design appear to be inspired by Mari Kurismaa’s installation *Architecton* (1984), which was itself reconstructed for the exhibition. In a context where nation-centric analysis dominates architectural history, the transnational scope of *Forecast and Fantasy* is a major achievement. A downside is that the Western exhibits included in the show function more to supply context than as evidence of exchanges across the East-West divide. Admittedly this has an institutional dimension, as the operating budget of a small Baltic museum is not sufficient to cover the loan fees charged by major North American institutions. However, the exhibition would have benefited from a deeper engagement with future thinking beyond that divide. For instance, the work of the Senegalese-French curator Oulimata Gueye around technology and Afrofuturism seems especially relevant.

As I consider the ideas referenced in *Forecast and Fantasy*, it dawns on me that urbanism stands out as a common thread running through the entire show. The displayed projects can be seen as so many responses to the crisis of socialist urban planning: automating, humanizing, escaping or dissolving the city. Our attention is thus directed to the politics of experimental architecture. Did it seek to reform or dismantle socialism? Are we looking at visions for an alternative socialism or alternatives to socialism? This

in turn raises concerns about the overwhelming emphasis in the exhibition on the end of the 1980s as a dividing line. What would the effect have been if the focus had been on, for example, the 1970s–2000s? In recent decades, many of the exhibited architects have ensconced themselves in neoliberal urban development networks. What is the onus of historians or curators in this regard? *Forecast and Fantasy* crystallizes a tension between a retro-utopian aesthetic and the challenge of bringing forth “a different kind of Left” in today’s society.

Urban Stocks takes up this challenge. On the second visit to the museum, we refuse to follow the detour. As we breach the fence around the construction site, the three-year-old who accompanies us gets very excited about rearranging the crushed stone and other construction material we find on the site. *Urban Stocks* is driven by similar curiosity (Figure 2). The title and subtitle together combine a reference to the millennia-old practice of repurposing stones from old buildings for new constructions with an emphasis on making the construction industry less extractive and more circular.



Figure 2: *Urban Stocks: Spolia Returns*. Installation view. Photo: Päär Joonap Keedus.

The exhibition, curated and designed by the architects Laura Linsi and Roland Reema, makes a series of clever references to architectural history, from spolia to cathedral architecture and the 1980 Venice Biennale’s *Strada Novissima*. We enter through a side (repurposed) door in what turns out to be the narthex of a cathedral-like space structured around a series of columns made of discarded materials and other elements. The columns of the central nave, showcasing contemporary research into

recycling and construction in Estonia, are made of reclaimed bricks and wood beams as well as more improbable elements such as light fixtures and compressed soil. The four side aisles are demarcated by another two rows of columns made of stuff that Linsi and Reema themselves collected for the exhibition, including wall cladding panels, metal boards and even decorative railing. The altar is dominated by a suspended woolen structure (presumably made from insulation wool) by Johanna Ulfsak, an illusion that itself alludes to the genre of illusionist sky painting. We also get to stroll in the ambulatory behind the altar, where tools that were used to build the exhibition are strewn haphazardly, referencing the performative dimension of recycling with a clear nod to relational aesthetics. The emphasis on the city as a stockpile of recyclable material is amplified by the two side chapels, which contain, respectively, Andres Toolts's 1983 canvas depicting an empty wall in Tallinn and an exquisite triptych by Linsi and Reema entitled *Allegory of the Sewage Treatment Plant* (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Laura Linsi and Roland Reema, *Allegory of the Sewage Treatment Plant* (2021). Exhibit, hand & digital drawing, digital print. Photo: Päär Joonap Keedus. Estonian Museum of Architecture, Tallinn, Estonia and Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK.

Urban Stocks foregrounds a series of material urgencies in the context of architecture, urbanism and climate change. While the practice of recycling construction materials is currently not widespread, the show demonstrates that the emerging interest in this area cuts across private, public and non-profit sectors. We learn about the potential of reusing surplus soil from excavation work for insulation purposes and a material

bank that collects doors, window frames and other elements for interested buyers. The exhibition also presents ongoing research into the recycling of construction material from mass-housing blocks slated for demolition. The focus is on post-Soviet Tallinn but *Urban Stocks* draws on the curators' work on a similar project in London.

Although the overview is broad and informative, the political economy and ecology of recycling is only tangentially addressed in the exhibition. The urban mining theme, which recurs throughout the exhibition, leaves us stuck in the extractive imaginary that the curators wish to challenge. Circular economy is another shibboleth that gives a false sense of completeness à la systems theory. After all, a circular economy is still a capitalist economy. The contradiction becomes especially clear when environmental discourses are invoked that have the effect of aggravating the already existing stigma surrounding public housing. Using mold or building lifespan to justify housing demolition confounds issues of safety and toxicity with the “recycling” of urban land through real estate speculation. Historically, spolia were frequently sourced from relatively sound structures, for instance, as a way for the popes to demonstrate their imperial prerogative. The etymology of the term that links it with stolen or forcibly taken goods confirms a close connection between spoliation and power. We leave the exhibition wondering how buildings become (or don't become) obsolete and then get dismantled in the first place and about upkeep, repair and other “reproductive” practices as alternatives to recycling.

As we exit the museum, we encounter a curious installation resembling a giant game of Tetris. A closer investigation reveals this to be the result of an experiment that used blockchain technology to put architecture on a more environmentally sustainable path. While the precise parameters of this enigmatic task elude us, the weathered object is a reminder of the gravitational pull of architecture towards eco-modernism. Against this contrasting backdrop, the two exhibitions can be seen as two investigations into the ways in which history matters: as a critical perspective on urban change and as the material fabric of cities.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

