

# Heritage in a Transitional Society

Estonia

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## SUMMARY

This article addresses the key problems of heritage protection in Estonia in the early 1990s, the period when the independent Republic of Estonia was restored. The period of transition from socialist to capitalist societies in Eastern Europe has still not been widely studied due to the fact that it is so recent. The article suggests comparisons to similar processes in other Eastern European countries.

In the occupied territory, heritage played an important role as the carrier of national identity. The restoration of people's memory and monuments quickly became one of the key elements of the independence movement and the Estonian Singing Revolution. The overall enthusiasm and high hopes for rapid reconstruction of the state and its valuable heritage was seriously affected by the property reform and the privatisation of protected monuments. The way heritage had been administered during the Soviet period was completely altered. The majority of the tasks, including research, conservation activities and supervision were given over to private companies. A significant number of monuments that were returned to private owners were in poor condition and in need of huge investments. The conflict between restrictions and the lack of subsidies created tensions between owners and authorities and affected the previously good reputation of heritage protection. While the questions of ownership were external factors in this process, the heritage authorities themselves did not foresee the developments which were to take place.

## Heritage as National Identity<sup>1</sup>

The restoration of the Republic of Estonia in 1991 was, no doubt, a result of an attempt to restore the national state, and was not unique in the history of mankind. Political ambitions are often related to the promotion of national heritage.

The scenarios vary, but very often this is a combination of both top down and bottom up initiatives that serves several goals. For example, we can refer to the ambitions to build up a more visible and tangible historical base for the Swedish Kingdom in the 17th century. The arguments of scientists to preserve the artefacts of the past were supported by a royal decree in 1666.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the movement of Greek patriots led to later protective regulations by the young Kingdom of Greece. We can also think of the importance of heritage in ambitious Prussia and the unification process of Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries, etc.<sup>3</sup>

As for Estonia, the worshipping of the past paved the way for the creation of the Republic of Estonia in 1918. The original inhabitants of the territory – Estonians – had been forced into serfdom for centuries. Although serfdom was abolished by the decrees of 1816 and 1819, it took more decrees to regulate the rights and relationships during the more than half a century struggle for actual social acknowledgement of Estonians. The rich pre-Christian, i.e. national, history and heritage were the key elements in the movement of the National Awakening in the second half of the 19th century. Information on ancient monuments, such as hill-forts, sacred stones and springs, as well as on traditional folklore and songs, was gathered. The collection of ethnographic items had started before the creation of the Estonian National Museum in 1909.

However, Estonia is a country where people of different nationalities live, and therefore there are multiple layers of national pride. Like Estonians, the dominant German population discovered the values of their cultural legacy during the forced Russification politics of the Russian Empire in the

Estonian and Livonian provinces at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Hanseatic history and outlook of Tallinn best reflected the German influence on Estonia. The last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed enormous developments due to industrialisation. Eliminating Tallinn from the list of fortified towns in 1857 opened the way to the demolition of medieval fortifications. In fact, the demolition had started earlier. However, the German-dominated municipality stopped the dismantling of the walls to preserve its Hanseatic appearance. The later Estonian dominated municipalities were not as emotionally attached to the walls and towers.

Similarly, the process of restoring independence in the 1980s had a significant component of respecting heritage. Once again everything that existed before occupation became valuable. One of the important drivers of the Singing Revolution was the grass-roots heritage movement. In 1987 a dozen local heritage unions united to form the Estonian Heritage Society. The Tartu Heritage Days in April 1988 witnessed the first Soviet-era public presentation of the national blue, black and white colours, not yet as a flag, but as three separate pieces of cloth. Heritage protection became one of the most important cornerstones of re-establishing the state. There was a feeling that everyone cared about historical monuments, and heritage was understood as a public responsibility.

However, the Heritage Society itself was not particularly involved in the actual preservation of built heritage. The most significant contribution of the Heritage Society was the restoration of memory by collecting the memoirs, the documentation of the crimes and repressions of the Soviet regime and the re-creation of the monuments of the War of Independence destroyed by the Soviets.

### **Re-discovered Heritage**

The enthusiasm of the heritage movement, in combination with the principle of re-introducing Western cultural values, was an eye opener for the general public: people started to notice forgotten heritage. In the front lines were the churches, shamelessly abused by the Soviets, who turned them into gyms, storage facilities and factories. Religion, as a charity field (although sometimes mixed with political interests), attracts money, and the parishes started to receive aid both from abroad and from local politicians.

Paradoxically, the legacy of the Baltic German landlords became glorified as the true remnants of Western civilisation. The paradox lies in the change of attitude towards the noble legacy in comparison with the times of the establishment of the state. The former manors, especially their lands and production units, had been nationalised in 1919. The agrarian reform had been both the political and economic basis of the pre-war Republic. It was intended to overthrow the existing political and social system and to restore the Estonian ownership of the land. Although a large number of the former manor houses were put to social use as schools, hospitals, nurseries, etc., the number of houses that were carelessly destroyed in the 1920s was remarkable. However, the condition of these grand buildings had become much worse during the Soviet period; dozens of them were simply left to decay due to poor maintenance. All the blame for the shabbiness and destruction was directed at the Soviet occupation.

### **Heritage in the Soviet Period**

The public awareness of heritage was indeed not a new phenomenon. Heritage protection had been popular for decades. Dealing with the past had always been a form of resistance to socialist standards. What was new was the enthusiasm of personal participation and a desire to take at least a share of the responsibility.

The first conservation act in the Soviet Union dates from 1961 and occurred in Estonia, and the first conservation area in the Soviet Union was created in Tallinn in 1966; in 1973 nine more conservation areas in Estonian towns were created. With a considerable number of monuments, Estonia was well protected.

Another peculiarity of Estonia, together with Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia, was that architectural monuments were administered through the Committee of Constructions and only archaeology and monuments of history (mainly statues and graveyards and some buildings of community importance) were governed by the Ministry of Culture. In comparison with other Soviet republics, where responsibility was assigned to the Ministry of Culture, there was a huge difference in money, materials and building capacity. The heritage protection organisation structure was impressive, comprised of a research and design institute, a restoration unit and a supervising institution. One thousand people were employed in heritage preservation. The free-

dom to make decisions about which buildings to restore was remarkable, as it was quite easy to move people out of state-owned buildings.

The main target of the Restoration Unit was Tallinn's Old Town, but remarkable attention was also paid to vernacular, i.e. national, architecture: inns, mills, farmhouses, etc. Starting in the 1970s, after the establishment of the Lahemaa National Park in 1971, the first manor houses were restored. While the work on manor houses was broadly advertised, the constantly ongoing work on Protestant churches was usually done without much fanfare. Despite the imposed Soviet ideology, heritage authorities protected valued national heritage.

### **Building up the New Protection Management**

The first cracks in the system appeared with perestroika, when Gorbachev favoured small enterprises. Many highly qualified architects left the institute and created their own studios. But the main drama was yet to come.

The new government of the independent state left heritage pretty much on its own. The Republic of Estonia started not just with a very small budget but with the ambition of changing from Soviet bureaucracy and non-efficient administration to a "minarchy", a thin state, leaving the responsibility for the majority of services to private companies. As a result, the new National Heritage Board consisted of only 60 employees. The National Heritage Board was established as a part of the Ministry of Culture, thus uniting the protection of the built, the archaeological and moveable heritage. As mentioned above, the funding of the cultural sector is usually poorer than the funding of the construction sector, regardless of the social or political system.

The number of specialists was clearly not adequate for the new challenges. First of all, the list of monuments had to be revised and restructured according to the new regulations. The bureaucratic burden was significant. A huge number of political monuments were excluded from the list, and the process of listing new monuments started. This included the recognition of new types of monuments but especially the listing of buildings that were in danger of demolition in the process of rapid development. For many, the status of national monuments just meant that buildings could not be demolished.

### **Ownership issues**

The main burden came with the change of ownership. Property reform was quite dramatic, including fraud and injustice. Property reform caused huge and often dramatic changes. Many of the former owners or their descendants lived in exile. Some of them returned to Estonia, but for many the property was owned anonymously by someone far away. A lot of the property was sold.

The biggest changes of the 1990s took place in the pre-WWII housing areas, where the property had been nationalised by the Soviets in the 1940s and the former owners had either escaped to the West or had been deported to Siberia. Here the Heritage Board witnessed the biggest gap in the registration of monuments, as the majority of historic wooden suburbs from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had not been protected. The National Heritage Board was forced into an unequal rivalry with the owners. As mentioned above, in an extremely short period and with limited resources, a huge number of buildings were listed. There was no time for any awareness raising or advising of the owners. The easiest way was to forbid the majority of changes and reconstructions the owners desired.

On the open market, many former manor houses were bought up by newly rich people. The majority of the manors had been state or municipal property since the 1920s and were in rather poor condition. Manors are situated in rural areas, many of which have turned into urban peripheral areas due to rapid urbanisation. The main problem in heritage protection was the extremely high cost not only of restoring but even of daily maintenance. There were almost no grants available, and therefore many of the new owners lost interest in their property. Only now has there been careful restoration of these manor houses, but at the price of terrible decay during the past 25 years.

Having made their way through complex bureaucracy in the restitution process, the new owners were very confident of their right to do with their property whatever they liked. The very recent national pride in a common heritage faded in the light of financial issues and the novel pride in being an owner. In too many cases the responses to the restrictions were unauthorised reconstruction projects, arson, etc. There was no trust between officials and owners, and the administration was blamed for harassing owners. This was emphasised by several politicians who became more and more

dependent on the support of the developers who had discovered the potential of the historic suburbs.

### **Financial issues**

The return of the former property was considered to be compensation for the political injustice of the past. However, the majority of the returned real estate was in shabby condition. The Heritage Board added to the already poorly maintained houses a list of restrictions and provided no compensation to owners. To the contrary, due to the restructuring of the system, the research, design and restoration work had to be commissioned from a small number of licensed private companies. The high price of the work was also influenced by the lack of traditional materials, which had to be specially ordered. The cost of restoration was absolutely incomparable with the fashionable reparation work with new cheap building materials that then flooded the Estonian building market. The costs of research, skilled masters and materials were rising constantly due to inflation.

As cultural heritage is considered to be a shared value, restrictions are normally expected to be compensated for, but this has remained one of the weaknesses of heritage protection in Estonia. The grants for owners are ridiculously small.

During the process of working out the new Conservation Act of 1994, fiscal matters were of low importance, although different funding schemes, such as tax benefits, rent taxes and tourism profit, were discussed. At the time of the transition to capitalism, there was also a strong belief in foundations and donations, which soon proved to be inefficient forms of funding.

New financial relations put an end to the Soviet-era rental tax system. Regardless of the above-mentioned discussions, the Conservation Act stated merely that owners had the right to apply for support from the National Heritage Board and municipalities, but no application mechanism was worked out. Heritage protection remained dependent on the weak state budget, as such earlier income sources as rents had been cancelled. In the 1990s the National Heritage Board was not strong enough to fight for a bigger budget, leaving the burden of conservation to owners. This was partly also because the working group that drew up the law was led by officials with backgrounds in the Ministry of Culture, whose budget had traditionally been quite small. The majority of the earlier funding had come from the Committee

of Construction. Financed objects were traditionally castles, museums and churches, which could no longer be the priority of the newly re-established state, which was dealing with lots of social and economic problems. As the National Heritage Board did not foresee the major cuts to the budget that occurred and did not work out new priorities, the whole system of heritage protection was marginalised. This not only affected the owners, but also caused trained conservators and archaeologists to lose their jobs and professional skills.

General public responsibility was expected but neither supported nor promoted. The state's support for private owners was completely underestimated. The splitting of responsibility, massive privatisation and uncontrolled sale of monuments to private owners led the government to repeatedly cut the already small budget of the National Heritage Board. For example, in 1994 the cut was from 18 million (1.15 million Euros) to 10 million Estonian kroons. The average budget of the National Heritage Board's investments was around one million Euros a year during the first 20 years of independence and has grown a little only in recent years.

Despite, or maybe even due to the changes in ownership, in the 1990s the National Heritage Board still continued its former priorities of financing the renovation of outstanding public buildings, such as castles and churches. In 1996–2002 the number of restored monuments ranged from 27 to 54 a year. The number of financed objects began to grow significantly only in the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the majority of the budget was no longer distributed only between churches and municipally owned manors, but also privately owned monuments got their share. This trend shows quite clearly not only the change in the priorities of the National Heritage Board, but also the significant change in society's attitude, and the awareness of owners in applying for support.

### **Authority as a Harasser**

Despite critical financing, the biggest problem was that the consent process of the restoration and conservation designs was not only restrictive but also very time consuming. There was an expectation that the processes could be improved, but instead the development of new standards, and the implementation of European Union regulations has made the process even slower and there is less room for debate and negotiation.

### New Layers of Heritage

The list of monuments is a calculated and legally supported way of shaping the knowledge of history. In addition to historical, artistic and architectural values, every listing also includes political and social assessment. Like the demolishing of the Baltic German nobility's elegant manor houses in the 1905 revolution and due to new ideas of the 1920s, the pulling down of architecturally valuable Soviet period buildings in the 1990s did not raise ethical questions for the majority of the society. Thus heritage protection has often had the political role of assimilating and evaluating different types of heritage.

Despite some tendencies highlighted above, Estonia has always had a relatively balanced list of monuments: the register of monuments reflects all historical periods, social ranks and almost all nationalities that have lived here. There is not a great deal of listed Estonian vernacular heritage, but in combination with other valorisation methods, ethnographic farm houses are well respected and still in use.

The first attempts to list the buildings from the Soviet period date only to 1999. In fact that is early, as it is in human nature not to understand and cherish the recent past. Nowadays Estonia has a representative list of 20<sup>th</sup> century heritage; the newest monument listed is the Estonian National Library, designed by the architect Raine Karp in 1992.

### Summary

The National Heritage Board turned 25 in 2018. In retrospective, we should be grateful to the people who managed to navigate heritage protection through the turbulent 1990s. This article points out some negative aspects, but without the strict restrictions of the heritage authorities, the old towns and suburbs would not have been preserved. Now, only twenty-five years later, the general public comprehends the aims of the preservation of heritage. Currently a new Conservation Act is being worked out, with its main aim being to minimise the misunderstandings and conflicts between authorities and owners and to find new mechanisms to support private owners. We have to bear in mind that the damage done to heritage during the transition period of the 1990s is still there and further damage should be avoided.

### Notes

- 1 The article is partly based on my PhD dissertation "Heritage in Transitional Society 1986-2002. From Nation's Conscience in the Estonian SSR into the Harasser of Private Owner in the Republic of Estonia" (Alatalu, Riin: *Muinsuskaitse siirdeühiskonnas 1986–2002: rahvusluse lipulaevast Eesti NSVs omaniku ahistajaks Eesti Vabariigis*, Tallinn 2012).
- 2 Adlercreutz, Thomas: The Royal Placat of 1666. Briefly about background and further importance, in: *Historical Perspective of Heritage Legislation. Balance Between Laws and Values*, eds. Riin Alatalu, Anneli Randla, Laura Ingerpuu, Diana Haapsal. Tallinn 2017, pp. 6–15.
- 3 Jokilehto, Jukka: *A History of Architectural Conservation*, Oxford etc. 1999, pp. 89–96, 112–127.