

ABC-Centres and Identities of Mustamäe Mikrorayons

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Summary

Abstract: This article studies the imagery of local commercial centres (the ABC-centres) in Mustamäe – the first post-war prefabricated housing area in Estonia. We argue that the ABC-centres functioned not just locations for shopping and services, but also ‘identity spots’: many residents identified their neighbourhood by their local ABC-centre. Today, the status and the identities of former ABC-centres have been considerably transformed. The framing idea of the article is to find common features between architectural history and cultural geography: ABC-centres are seen as urban landscape with specific historical context and tangible architectural qualities, at the same time being culturally meaningful on the level of social representations.

In the second half of the 1960s, new social and commercial centres were planned in every *mikrorayon* (neighbourhood unit) of the first modernist pre-fabricated housing area in Tallinn, Mustamäe. Although the major change that was brought about by these centres was to make all basic everyday services available in one’s own neighbourhood, the ABC-centres, as they were named after the Swedish post-war housing areas, also represented a novel type of urban space. New pedestrian commercial centres operated as a simulation of traditional city centres in a sparse, freely planned new settlement. Their architectural form, often combined with sloping terrain, commercial signs on the façades

etc., helped to create a specific sense of belonging. Many residents identified their neighbourhood by their ABC-centre more than by their *mikrorayon* – hence trying to find a new urban anchor to replace the traditional ones (‘our courtyard’, or ‘our street’), which were lost in the unified building mass.

Today, the role of ABC-centres as local centres and identity creators has been considerably transformed. Located inside the *mikrorayon* and away from the main streets, they signify not only changed urban practices but also the marginalisation of certain ways of living. Being difficult to access by car, the ABC-centres have not only lost their clients and former function, but their architectural clarity is physically deteriorating or blurred in a visual melange subject to the logic of the market economy. In a wider sense, the deterioration of the former neighbourhood centres symbolises the transformation of local identity and lifestyle dynamics.

Taking the notion of landscape as a baseline, the framing idea of this article is to find common features between architectural history and cultural geography.

Change and landscape imagery form one of the central themes in contemporary cultural geography, which sees landscape as a socio-cultural form of environment. In this context, we are interested in looking at ABC-centres in Mustamäe as not just physical urban environments but also as identity containers: what kind of practices determine the former commercial centres today and what meanings are mediated by those practices?

ABC-towns: background and ideas

The main source for Mustamäe’s local community and commercial centres was the principle of ABC-towns which arose in Sweden in the 1950s, which, in turn, was based on the model of the neighbourhood unit that spread

throughout most of the Western world after World War II.¹ *Arbete, Bostad, Centrum* ('work, living, centre') as it was known in Swedish, or a multi-functional satellite city that combined housing with workplaces and the local centre, was first put into practice in the Vällingby residential district (1950–1954, architect Sven Markelius) in western Stockholm. It was also the last one of its kind, as it was hard to organise enough jobs there. The Vällingby centre (1953–1955, architects Sven Bäckström and Leif Reinius) was the first to introduce the commercial pedestrian precinct in Northern Europe.² Thus, taking into account its iconic position in European post-war urban planning and architecture, it is quite understandable that the *mikrorajoon* centres in Mustamäe refer to ABC-towns, quite formally, through their names. At the same time, they can be compared to Swedish neighbourhood or community centres in their ideological role of functioning as places for collective life.

ABC-centres in Mustamäe

Initially planned as standardised buildings, the ABC-centres were nevertheless built, mainly during the 1970s, according to individual designs. Their common visual and architectural identity was constructed by a recognisable spatial and visual form: compact public space surrounded by low built volumes, and pedestrians moving between different shops and services: food and everyday products, culinary or take-away food, hairdressers, shoemakers, photo studios, dry cleaning shops, municipal housing office etc., as well as different social functions (a universal hall used for sports or gatherings, a café or a restaurant). Their architectural vocabulary included rational cubic volumes, mostly with brick facades covered with flat roofs with wide overhanging cornices. The façades adjoining the pedestrian precinct had huge win-

dows, so that walking by was similar to the effect of passing shop windows in traditional urban centres; the main public area was decorated with a pool or fountain, or an abstract sculpture in some cases.

The first multi-functional community and commercial centre in Mustamäe was built in the 2nd *mikrorajoon*; it had a low rectangular U-shaped volume with a brick-façade and a flat roof with a wide, dark painted cornice – elements that would prevail in later ABC-centres. ABC-4 (1965–1969, architects Paula Koido, Enno Talgre), located in the 4th *mikrorajoon*, was the first supermarket³ to be built in Tallinn and also the first centre to be named an ABC-centre. The layout has, exceptionally, an outgoing character, resembling a classic urban quarter: different volumes are placed with their 'backs' together, forming a closed technical courtyard inside the 'quarter'. The visual and architectural parameters of ABC-centres reached their height with ABC-5 (1963–1970, architect Peep Jänes), considered to be the most representative one in Soviet Estonia. Wide stairs placed on a sloping terrain led from a bus stop on the main street to a pedestrian area lined by low build-

1 The neighbourhood unit was introduced by Clarence Perry in 'The Neighborhood Unit: A Scheme of the Arrangement for Family-Life Community' in 1929.

2 The first pedestrian areas were planned in Coventry and Rotterdam – cities that were heavily bombed in the Second World War. The Coventry shopping area was designed in 1942 by Donald Gibson, but was not completed until the late 1950s. Hence, the first car-free pedestrian precinct was Lijnbaan in Rotterdam (J. H. van den Broek and J. B. Bakema, 1948–1953), which served as a model for shopping centres in new towns and residential districts throughout Europe (E. Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 150).

3 Supermarkets were food stores that had floor space over 400 m². The first supermarket in the Soviet Union opened in Leningrad (today St. Petersburg) in 1965 (J. Ojalo, *Iseteenindamise A ja B*. Tallinn: Valgus, 1970, pp. 14–15).

ings placed freely under flat roof 'plates'. An absolutely new approach to urban life in Mustamäe can be seen in ABC-6 (designed 1968, completed in early 1980s, architect Miia Masso), which was probably the first building in Estonia to play with the idea of multi-layered urban space and life. ABC-6 is a total structure that hides a complicated organism. The lower volume of the supermarket intersects with the higher volume of the services' building, where smaller shops and workshops are located on an open shopping street, which is on the upper level of the building. ABC-8 (1970, architects Tiiu Argus and Vivian Lukk,) continued the motif of building volumes raised on a slope, as in the case of ABC-5, with a public area in front of the building that is enhanced by pine trees, a pool and a sculpture. ABC-3 (1970, architect H. Aurik) and ABC-7 (1965–1972, architects Paul Madalik and H. Ainumäe) were both smaller centres built in additional *mikrorayons* not planned in the original Mustamäe detailed plan.

ABC-centres and a new life-style

The functional and urban ideas that ABC-centres represent connect with changes in lifestyles in the 1960s. On one hand, the changes emerged on the level of everyday habits and routine, e.g. buying food products in self-service shops. On the other hand, a change was evident in the spatial character of new urban practices, such as the occurrence of consumer space. In terms of modern consumer culture and space, the ABC-centres could be considered equivalent to Western supermarkets. But the main difference between the Soviet and the capitalist consumer space, in spite of their common simulative urban qualities, was the visibility of their ideological content. Capitalist commercial spaces can be described as semi-public urban-like spaces that seemingly allow the experience of freedom or sense of public place in an area

controlled by private interests.⁴ In a communist state, the public areas were public, indeed, and thus overtly ideological. At the same time, the different kind of space that resembled Western life-styles offered hidden opportunities to experience individual freedom on the level of everyday life.⁵

In addition to everyday changes, the transformative role of the ABC-centres can be seen on the level of representation – production of space and architecture, printed media, language etc. For instance, a new urban context that resembled the Western everyday urban space was a popular subject on Soviet-era picture albums printed with propagandist aims. The architecture and urban landscape design had a specific importance in terms of image creation: calm and tasteful Nordic modernism that combined brick, wood and glass had become a recognised symbol of modern times in the 1960s. Influenced by Swedish and Finnish organic modernism, ABC-centres differed from the harsh montage-line industrial look of the apartment buildings in Mustamäe and, therefore, they acquired a

4 T.-K. Lehtonen, P. Mäenpää, Valtava mustekala. Kuinka kauppakeskusta käytetään. [A Huge Octopus. How a Shopping Centre is Used.] Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskuksen tutkimuksia no. 6, Helsinki, 1997, pp. 6 and 16. Referred to in J. Lahti, Tapionraitti – The Backbone of the Pedestrian Precinct. – Tapiola. Life and Architecture. Espoo: Housing Foundation, City of Espoo, 2003, p. 70.

5 Consumption and individual freedom in Soviet society had a different relationship to each other than is usually presented in studies of Western consumer culture. Paradoxically, everyday life and the private sphere were under continuous pressure from the public sphere – tearing down fences in historical housing areas and liquidating closed courtyards are good examples. Therefore, consumerism as an individual act and ABC-centres as 'different places' acquired slightly more reactionary connotations in Soviet society than in Western Europe, where shopping centres were associated with reproducing the existing power relations.

symbolic function as urban signs. Neal Leach has written about camouflage as a kind of spatial practice or behaviour that helps one to adjust to an alienating environment. Camouflage has an aesthetic or visual dimension and, therefore, it helps one to re-establish a sense of belonging in a society where traditional structures of belonging have begun to break down.⁶ As there were no 'other kind of' or 'meaningful' places in Mustamäe, ABC-centres, as architecturally and functionally different from the rest of the urban settlement, were ascribed that kind of meaning.

In the correlation of social and economic transformations during the past fifteen years, the symbolic as well as functional importance of the *mikrorajoon* centres has changed considerably. Besides being inaccessible to car traffic, poor maintenance and the resultant partially reconstructed, partially deteriorating physical state reflect the divided ownership of the buildings. The functional scheme and services available in the centres are rather illustrative as well: second hand clothing stores, pawn shops, casinos etc. New commercial centres have been built according to the main streets leading through the district, so the former ABC-centres have remained in use mainly by the first generation of Mustamäe residents, who are retired now, and women whose mobility is lower than in other social groups.⁷

Conclusion

Along with the metamorphoses visible in the domestic environment and urban landscape, Mustamäe is totally marginalised by contemporary culture, for instance in Estonian literature, compared to its perception in the optimistic sixties, as well as in the social thought of the critically minded seventies.⁸ At the same time, Mustamäe cannot be described as a hopeless slum, although today it represents a collapsed utopia. The margin-

alisation of ABC-centres cannot automatically be connected with the backwardness of the whole Mustamäe area, whose identity creation is today different but diverse. A new supermarket, built near one of the main roads leading through Mustamäe, is making efforts to acquire the status of a district centre, advertising itself foremost as a supermarket for people living in Mustamäe. Another visible change is evident at the level of local government. While in the Soviet era the imagery of Mustamäe was dominated by the ideas of modern residential settlement and living conditions, and the promises of the communist welfare society, today it is the greenery, the forest town and the campus and research centre of the Technical University that are considered to be the most important elements.

Changes in the identities and uses of Mustamäe and the ABC-centres tell us that our relation to the built environment is never static, but is continuously subject to appropriation.⁹ Hence, landscape and spatial representations are always strategic – they connect and adjust us to new social and economic conditions and practices as, in turn, these adjustments affect our understanding and perception of the built environment and different time layers in the landscape.

Summary by Epp Lankots

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⁶ N. Leach, *Camouflage*. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2006, pp. 244–245.

⁷ Mustamäe linnaosa arengukava 2007–2015. [Development plan for the Mustamäe district.] Tallinn: Tallinna Linnavolikogu, Tallinna Linnavalitsus, Mustamäe Halduskogu, Mustamäe Linnaosa Valitsus, 2007, p. 28.

⁸ P. Viires, *Mustamäe Metamorphoses*. – Koht ja Paik / Place and Location: Studies in Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics III. Proceedings of the Estonian Academy of Arts 14. Eds. V. Sarapik, K. Tüür. Tallinn, 2003, p. 400.

⁹ N. Leach, *Camouflage*, p. 7.