

Participation, Housing, and the Question of 'Good Architecture'

Maroš Krivý

The Tallinn Architecture Biennale (TAB) was held in September 2013. Following the first TAB, 'Landscape Urbanism' (2011), the recent edition offered a more ambitious theme of 'Recycling Socialism'. The event was organised and curated by young female architects from the Tallinn-based b210 office. Some of Tallinn's most representative buildings of the state socialist period were carefully selected for hosting the Biennale's two-day symposium, curators' exhibition, vision competition, and an exhibition of school projects (plus a number of satellite events, organised within TAB's participatory platform). In contrast, TAB's headquarters was located in a pop-up café on one of Tallinn's main thoroughfares.

I would like to identify a number of themes and contradictions that crystallised during the event. First of all, let us notice the ambiguity of the event title. What is meant by socialism? And what is to be recycled? Is it the architecture from the 'era of socialism' or is it the idea/ideology that underpinned this architecture? This ambiguity was articulated early on in the symposium. In his opening speech, Raul Järg, the Chairman of the Estonian Centre of Architecture, dressed in white from head to toe, referred to the ongoing municipal election campaign in Estonia in a Krierian manner: 'If you look on the streets, there is no politics, only architecture'. To which Andres Kurg, Head of the Art History Institute at the Estonian Academy of Arts and the first speaker, retorted: 'In fact, it is all about politics'.

The 'Soviet' and the 'socialist' are often assumed to be identical, as in the well-worn phrase which implies that 'Estonia gained independence' from both. Referring to the work of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, Kurg challenged such interpretations. The ironic distance from the official discourse of the Soviet state in the activities and drawings of architects from the 1970s and 1980s – the topic of his research – cannot be automatically equated with the abandonment of the idea of collectivity.

Such an approach, which seeks a more politically-nuanced interpretation of parallel architectural practices, contrasts with attempts to locate the qualities of architecture outside politics. Lukasz Wojciechowski from the Polish studio VROA stated that in Poland, one talks about modernist rather than socialist architecture. He further dissociated 'good' architecture from its political context: 'If it is good architecture, it doesn't matter if it is Nazi or anything else'.

However, what are the assessment criteria for architectural objects? This is clearly a historical and political question. Wojciechowski's claim can also be challenged within the Polish context. In their discussion of the future of Oskar Hansen's housing estate in Warsaw, Aleksandra Kędziorek and Łukasz Stanek argued that its 'preservation [...] needs to be conceived as ensuring [...] continuation along [...] theoretical principles and social ambitions'.¹

The question of *good architecture* resonated among other speakers, too. In a more promising way, Petra Čeferin, a professor in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Ljubljana, related good architecture to its universality; that is, its capacity to interrupt the dominant social order. But questions remain: is it enough that such an 'interruption' takes place when the building is built? How is this interruptive capacity transformed over time? How is it recuperated, reinterpreted and repurposed in shifting political contexts? How can we talk about 'good architecture' in a historical retrospective? How is its 'heritage' value constituted in the long run? In contrast to technical and phenomenological approaches, which would like to see heritage located inside the architectural object, we should highlight the historicity of heritage; in other words, the historically changing criteria that underpin what is considered as heritage.

In a classical argument, Alois Riegl discussed the role of *age value* in the modern practice of elevating architectural objects to the status of monuments.² In their book *The Tourist-Historic City* (1994), Ashworth and Tunbridge wrote that the chance of an architectural object becoming recognised as heritage increases significantly after its first 50 to 100 years.³ This assessment itself is a historical observation. The Tallinn Biennale, which brought into focus buildings from the 1970s and 1980s, well exemplified the acceleration of heritage production.

The vision competition took as its target Väike-Õismäe, Tallinn's third largest housing estate (architects Mart Port and Malle Meelak, built 1974-77, population 27,172). [fig. 1] The brief was to 'diversify Väike-Õismäe's urban space and create an enjoyable living environment'.⁴ In their winning entry 'The Assembled Ground: How to Wake Up the Sleeping District of Väike-Õismäe?', the international team Dynamo (with several alumnus of the Strelka Institute) gave a nod to the nearby Estonian Open Air Museum and proposed reserving one

quarter of Väike-Õismäe for a similar endeavour to showcase how people lived in the 1970s (the project does not inform us whether residents will be asked to perform the past, or whether they will be replaced with trained actors). Luckily, post-socialist nostalgia and culturalisation of state socialism is a rather minor aspect of the project; the core of the proposal lies in improving public spaces. What is offered? The panels of the first two floors are removed and reassembled at a distance. [fig. 2] This achieves a double effect: the activation of the ground floor (for cafés, small businesses, services, studios, etc.) and the creation of a flexible stage for changing community programmes.

In the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia, the 1980s marked a period of important debate about the humanisation and diversification of housing estates.⁵ Largely forgotten during the 1990s and 2000s, a revival of this debate has taken place in recent years. This is clearly manifested in Dynamo's winning proposal, as well as in a majority of the submissions for the vision competition and in the TAB event as a whole.

Vertical and horizontal cutting has become a popular strategy when addressing the 'revitalisation' of socialist housing estates – realised in parts of rapidly shrinking cities of eastern Germany, but purely speculative elsewhere. The strategy was used in number of submissions for the TAB vision competition, and also in a number of projects shown at the LASN exhibition (the first curatorial exhibition of the Union of Estonian Architects, held in Tallinn in 2011), which addressed the future of Tallinn's largest housing estate, Lasnamäe.⁶ What many projects employing such a strategy ignore is the ownership structure. The majority of the housing stock, erected during the period of state socialism in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, was municipalised, and subsequently privatised, during the 1990s. An average prefabricated apartment building now operates as a condominium.⁷ The maintenance of



Fig. 1

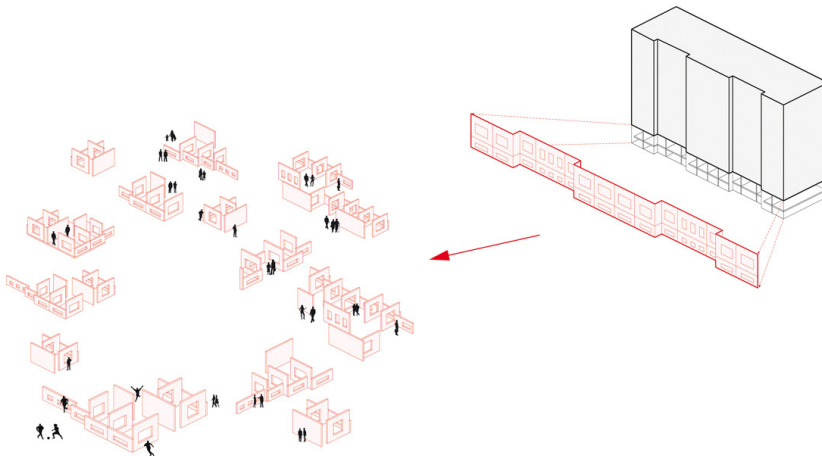


Fig. 2

Fig. 1: Väike-Õismäe, Tallinn. © Arne Maasik.

Fig. 2: Dynamo, The Assembled Ground, 2013. Courtesy of Dynamo.

this or that building is often arbitrary and depends on the dynamics of the respective associations of homeowners. A coordinated action is quite difficult to imagine – urban planning relies on incentives and bans. So, returning once more to ‘The Assembled Ground’: how do the authors imagine the process of disassembling the lower levels? Are the owners going to be expropriated in order to improve the communal life of Väike-Õismäe? Is the municipality going to buy out the owners? The project is silent on these questions, and the jury’s assessment, although it mentions the technical complexity of the proposal, says nothing about property relations either.

In spite of the rather extensive nature of the intervention, its participatory approach captures something of the essence of the majority of the eighty-six competition submissions. These characterise Väike-Õismäe as a sleeping district, a rigid and lifeless neighbourhood, a desolate bedroom suburb, or as a grey place where nothing happens. Such discursive strategy amplifies the competition brief (the very curatorial act of calling for *visions* subtly characterises Väike-Õismäe as a stigmatised district) and sets the stage for the act of intervention. This could be summarised as follows: work with cheap materials and mostly with what is found at the site. Assemble DIY and temporary structures. Fix the broken modernist space. Use it as a platform to involve local residents. Imagine the social in terms of a community. Bring the people together. Fix the broken communal spirit.

A similar practice is also characteristic of the Berlin-based office, raumlabor, represented by Olga Maria Hungar, who shared the symposium stage with the presenters mentioned above. The office’s work lies at the intersection of art, architecture and urbanism and is characterised by an affection for temporary uses.⁸ It strongly resonates with Tallinn-based Linnalabor (Urban Lab), which utilises a similar cross-disciplinary approach and

identifies urban activism and the promotion of grass-roots participation as its field of operation. On behalf of raumlabor, Hungar stated that they admire modernist megastructures, yet it is clear to them we have to say ‘Bye-Bye Utopia’ (as one of their projects is named), and this is where their work starts.

Hungar presented two raumlabor projects, *Eichbaumoper* and *The Kitchen Monument*. *Eichbaumoper* stages an opera performance in the Eichbaum metro station of a Ruhr Valley metropolis. The station was built in the 1970s at a highway interchange. [fig. 3] The opera’s plot was supplied by the local residents, who also performed in it. The architects describe it as ‘a theatre in which there were no spectators, only actors’.⁹ Though *Eichbaumoper* was temporary, raumlabor believes that ‘a process of change was activated’.¹⁰ Raumlabor encountered a problem during the project: local youngsters were not interested in the opera. ‘So what are you interested in?’, the architects asked. They were interested in boxing. So a boxing match was organised - and this time there were even spectators.

The Kitchen Monument is an inflatable sculpture that can be expanded to cover up to 200 square metres. [fig. 4] It is relatively easy to transport and can be used to create temporary semi-public spaces for eating, dancing, film screening or steam-bathing. In a modified version and under the name *Spacebuster*, the sculpture was recently used in New York City.

Three aspects of raumlabor’s strategy are of particular interest here. Firstly, their agenda always starts from ‘dead’ modernist spaces – an elevated highway being perhaps the most vilified concrete example. The role of the architect is understood as that of an agent who brings unconventional temporary uses to these spaces. In some ways their actions resemble those of the critical spatial practices of Jane Rendell and Markus Miessen,¹¹ but

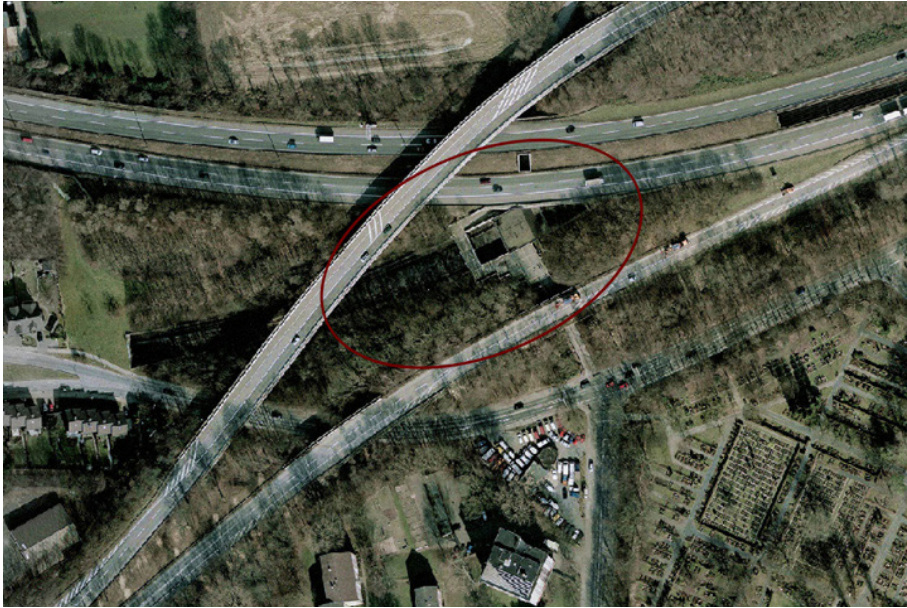


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Fig. 3: Raumlabor, Eichbaumoper, 2009. Courtesy of raumlabor.

Fig. 4: Raumlabor, The Kitchen Monument, 2006. Courtesy of raumlabor, © Marco Canevacci.

raumlabor largely strip theirs of any wider political ambitions. They are characterised by conviviality and (smart) consumption, and follow the design/policy strategies of urban catalysts¹² and urban acupuncture.¹³

The second premise is the assumption that users can clearly articulate their needs and desires if only they have a chance to do so. The task of the architect is therefore twofold: firstly, to create a situation in which these needs and desires can be articulated (a sort of Habermasian, ideal speech situation); and secondly, to provide a participatory platform where the needs and desires can be (temporarily) realised (What do you like? Boxing? Then here's the boxing ring).

Thirdly, an event is always conceived of as more than it is. As already mentioned, the ephemerality of architectural/urbanistic practice of this type is justified by its after-effects and its capacity to initiate a wider change (spatial or temporal). But what kind of change? Often, it is conceived of as more of the same: more conviviality or more (smart) consumption. I do not want to deny that practices such as raumlabor's generate happy moments, authentic experiences and nice little spaces; they certainly do. But it is important to see – and I am not claiming that raumlabor does not see it – that the question is what to do about the fact that such well-intended acts are not unrelated to the processes of gentrification, displacement, and the emergence of new social conflicts. Not to mention that these practices are being increasingly used by private developers to raise real-estate values, and by municipalities to proceed with their place-making and creative-city strategies.¹⁴

Raumlabor's presentation was preceded by a talk by Pier Vittorio Aureli from DOGMA. In his talk, Aureli elaborated on the proposal for a central railway station in Tallinn, which DOGMA prepared

for the TAB curator's exhibition. The office was one of twelve participants, including raumlabor, who were invited to reinterpret key buildings and spaces of state socialism in Tallinn.

We could say that Aureli/DOGMA starts where raumlabor stops. Conviviality and sociability are not the final answers to the modernist-Fordist city, but the point to begin interrogating the post-Fordist city. Firstly, there is an aesthetic challenge: 'the city doesn't always have to be cute and full of things'. The question of the ubiquity of design is then linked with the social question of 'creative industries' (as their visionaries call them), or post-Fordist labour (as Aureli calls it). Aureli develops the concept of the social around two issues, both sidelined in raumlabor's approach and in most participatory urbanism: the question of labour/production and the question of domesticity/interiority.

Aureli draws on his earlier discussion of Italian *operaismo*¹⁵ and of the problems of limiting and separation in architecture,¹⁶ but relates them to the question of new, immaterial labour and its reproduction in the post-Fordist era. The proposal *The Return of the Factory* harks back to the history of the spatial typology of domesticity (11th-century monasteries, Fourier's phalanx, constructivist debates on communal living, Warhol's Silver Factory) and connects it to contemporary concerns with the post-Fordist social factory.¹⁷ [fig. 5] It reinvents the factory as a domestic space. The project consists of a long, thin, eight-storey wall of housing block, elevated on Miesian plinths.¹⁸ Conceived for 1600 inhabitants, it is situated parallel to railway tracks at the south-east edge of Kalamaja, Tallinn's bohemian and gentrified district full of 'cute little spaces'. The basic unit is a single cell measuring 6x6 metres. Living space can be extended by the horizontal and/or vertical merging of cells. The separation between private, semi-private and public space is flexible, reflecting new, non-standard forms of family organisation.

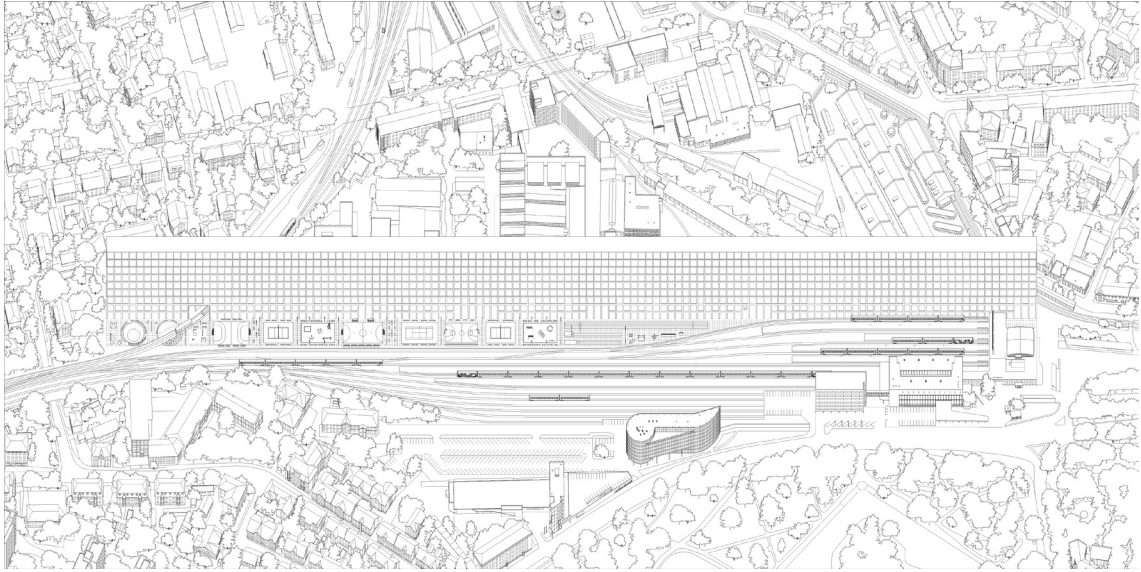


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Fig. 5: DOGMA, The Return of The Factory, 2013. Courtesy of DOGMA.

Fig. 6: Balti Railway Station market. © author.

This echoes Aureli's assessment of Plattenbau architecture: it is not its monotonousness (to call it this already amounts to a judgement) or large scale, but the rigidity of its domestic forms that is the most fundamental problem.

Rather than situating participation on the side of conviviality, free time, consumption or life-style preferences, *The Return of the Factory* starts from the premise that we already participate enough, propelled by soft strategies of control. Such a premise perhaps refers to Deleuze's notion of 'control society', in which power relations operate inclusively rather than exclusively, assuming forms of perpetual training and continuous assessment.¹⁹ So the question is not how to stimulate more participation, but how to meaningfully (re)organise it on the basis of a series of divisions: inside/outside, privacy/publicness, individuality/collectivity, working time/free time, production/consumption.

And here comes perhaps the most challenging and debatable aspect of DOGMA's approach. Starting from the premise that post-Fordist workers are unorganised, the ambition is to give visibility to their social situation, to make explicit the precarious underside of glamorous creativity and perhaps contribute to their possible collective organisation. This strategy repeatedly appears in Aureli's/DOGMA's work. The Miesian plinth is justified because 'the forces of urbanization are made explicit and are made to define their own position as agonistic forms [...] The plinth introduces a stoppage into the smoothness of urban space'.²⁰ In a similar way, DOGMA's project *Simple Heart*, which rethinks Cedric Price's *Potteries Thinkbelt* for a post-Fordist era, is characterised as 'the utmost embodiment of this condition [of precariousness of life], and at the same time the frame holding it. The aim of the project is not to eliminate the ethos of the social factory, but to make it explicit'.²¹ Though admirable, one would like to see Aureli more explicit about what *making explicit* means. A question from

the audience challenged him as to whether the proposal is not simply a standard industrial loft. To what extent is the success of making social contradictions of the day explicit dependent on how the architecture is read and used? And can this issue be resolved on architecture's terrain? – noticing, in particular, that Aureli expressed reservations about prescribing spatial programmes, and that the project does not really engage with the question of property relations.

It is encouraging that Aureli does not succumb to standard cynicism about hipsters, but the question remains: who are the intended users of the building? Interventions from the audience brought into debate the notion of a 'creative class', but the unglamorous 'service class' and industrial workers, many now unemployed, were considered neither in the proposal nor in the debate. I understand that the task of a single project is not to solve all social contradictions, yet these social groups represent the majority of the site's current users, and of the nearby Balti Railway Station market in particular, where old ladies sell garlic, marinated beetroot and woollen socks, and people with little money to spare come to purchase cheap clothes and expired groceries [fig. 6]. In Tallinn, this question also has a strong ethnic dimension, since many residents belong to the Russian-speaking population, relocated to Tallinn as part of Soviet industrialisation policies and made redundant in the 1990s.

Just as the Soviet is blurred with the socialist, so the socialist is blurred in itself: do we have in mind architectural objects or practices? In one way or another, most of the strategies for 'recycling socialism' presented during the Tallinn Architecture Biennale, relied on (a return to) participation. In Powerpoint presentations and exhibition posters, images of empty buildings were usually described as 'not working', while those which depicted a large number of people in convivial mood were accompanied by 'you see, it can work'. Though most of the

participants disavowed universal solutions associated with modernism, the cultural programmes and tactics of community revival they offered seem like today's universal strategy for the modernist architecture of Soviet state socialism.

Yet another approach crystallised during the Biennale. In the proposal by DOGMA in particular, recycling – or 'reconstruction', as Aureli suggested – was conceived as being more than just a question of what to do with buildings from the period of state socialism. Here, participation is grasped as a social question. Rather than conceived in relation to community regeneration, architectural practice is bound up with the question of overall social organisation; rather than being limited to cultural consumption, it touches on the whole sphere of economic production and distribution; and rather than stimulating conviviality, its task is seen as negotiating the borders between exteriority and interiority. Consequently, the forgotten housing question poses a challenge for the participatory turn.

Notes

1. Aleksandra Kędziorek and Łukasz Stanek, 'Architecture as a Pedagogical Object: What to Preserve of the Przczołek Grochowski Housing Estate by Oskar & Zofia Hansen in Warsaw?', *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, 46, 3-4 (2012), pp. 2-21, p. 17.
2. Alois Riegl, 'The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin', in *Oppositions Reader*, ed. by K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), pp. 621-53.
3. Gregory J. Ashworth and John E. Tunbridge, *The Tourist-Historic City* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).
4. <<http://www.tab.ee/program/vision-competition>> [accessed 10 September 2013].
5. See, for example, Peter Bauer, 'Panelový dům a design [Panel House and Design]', *Architektura ČSR*, 41, 6 (1982), pp. 264-66.
6. See the exhibition catalogue: Reedik Poopuu, *LASN* (Tallinn: Union of Estonian Architects, 2011).
7. For an overview, see Peter Marcuse, 'Privatization and Its Discontents: Property Rights in Land and Housing in the Transition in Eastern Europe', in *Cities After Socialism. Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies*, ed. by Gregory Andrusz, Michael Harloe and Ivan Szélényi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Zoltán Kovács and Günter Herfert, 'Development Pathways of Large Housing Estates in Post-socialist Cities: An International Comparison', *Housing Studies*, 27, 3 (2012), pp. 324-42. With reference to Tallinn, see Anneli Kährik and Tiit Tammaru, 'Soviet Prefabricated Panel Housing Estates: Areas of Continued Social Mix or Decline? The Case of Tallinn', *Housing Studies*, 25, 2 (2010), pp. 201-19.
8. For a critical view of the practice of temporary use in Berlin, see Claire Colomb, 'Pushing the Urban Frontier: Temporary Uses of Space, City Marketing and the Creative City Discourse in 2000s Berlin', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 34, 2 (2012), pp. 131-52.
9. <<http://www.raumlabor.net/?p=590>> [accessed 10 September 2013].
10. Ibid.
11. Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture* (London: IB Tauris, 2006); *What Is Critical Spatial Practice?*, ed. by Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).
12. Philipp Oswalt, Klaus Overmeyer and Philipp Misselwitz, *Urban Catalyst: The Power of Temporary Use* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2013).
13. Manuel De Sola Morales, *A Matter of Things* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2008).
14. See, for example, Claire Colomb, 'Pushing the Urban Frontier: Temporary Uses of Space, City Marketing and the Creative City Discourse in 2000s Berlin'; Stephan Lanz, 'Be Berlin! Governing the City through Freedom', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37, 4 (2012), pp. 1305-24; Maroš Krivý, 'Don't Plan! The Use of the Notion of 'Culture' in Transforming Obsolete Industrial Space', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37, 5

- (2013), pp. 1724-46.
15. Pier V. Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).
 16. Pier V. Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011).
 17. Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Immaterial Labour', in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. by Paul Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 133-47; Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011); Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, 'In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25, 7-8 (2008), pp. 1-30.
 18. For the debate on the Miesian plinth, see Pier V. Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, pp. 34-46.
 19. Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59 (Winter 1992), pp. 3-7; Gilles Deleuze, 'Control and Becoming (in conversation with Antonio Negri)', *Futur Anterieur*, 1 (Spring 1990) <<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze3.htm>> [accessed 10 September 2013].
 20. Pier V. Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, pp. 40-1.
 21. Pier V. Aureli and Martino Tattara, 'A Simple Heart: Architecture on the Ruins of the Post-Fordist City', *Architectural Design*, 81, 1 (2011), pp. 110-19, p. 119.

Biography

Maroš Krivý is currently Invited Professor of Urban Studies at the Faculty of Architecture, Estonian Academy of Arts. In 2012 he obtained a PhD in Urban Studies from the University of Helsinki. Among his publications are 'Don't Plan! The Use of the Notion of 'Culture' in Transforming Obsolete Industrial Space' (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2013) and 'Industrial Architecture and Negativity: the Aesthetics of Architecture in the Works of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher' (*Journal of Architecture*, 2010). Maroš is also a visual artist and researcher. His project *New Coat of Paint* was exhibited at the Hobusepea Gallery in Tallinn (2013), and was included in the Alternativa festival organised by IS Wyspa in Gdańsk (2013). He was the winner of the Sittcomm award (2011).