

RISEN FROM THE DEAD: FROM SLUMMING TO GENTRIFICATION

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Abstract

Political tides are evident in most community development practices. Sometimes it hinders good planning while at other times it aides development, and sometimes the unintended consequences of politics preserve neighborhoods for a long time, allowing for a totally different development outcome. This article is a detailed case study of one such neighborhood. This neighborhood, known as Supilinn, in Tartu Estonia was a rundown area slated for total demolition during Soviet occupation. Due to the lack of finances and low priorities, the former communist regime abandoned the idea of demolition and left the neighborhood to deteriorate further. Two decades later, Supilinn is a bustling community where young and old, rich and poor, existing and new, all co-exist. A community left to die has resurrected itself through bottom up planning and citizen initiatives to become one of the preferred places to live, so much so that the neighborhood now faces the threat of gentrification with social displacement and complete renewal. The authors, all active members in this neighborhood, have lived and worked there for a while. They tell the story of many such transformations across the landscape through the lens of one case study.

Keywords: Estonia, gentrification, urban revitalization, post-socialist, historical wooden architecture, cultural value, social diversity.



1. Place in space

Tartu is one of the oldest towns in the Baltic States and Estonia. It was first mentioned in written sources in 1030. Tartu was the center of a city-state in medieval times; it was the semi-independent Bishopric of Dorpat. The medieval town was captured many times during wars from 1558 to 1704 and was totally demolished by the Russian army during the Great Northern War (1700-1721). The first known map (from 1681) depicting the administrative borders of Tartu presents almost all of Supilinn within Tartu and bordering the medieval walled town centre (Estonian Historical Archives, 1729). The outermost city blocks of Supilinn were laid by Tartu town government in 1844.

The crossing of a north-south land route and a west-east water route (the river Emajõgi) conferred a very good position for Tartu as a fortified trading post. Since Supilinn was outside the fortified center, it suffered each time Tartu was under siege

(see Figure 1). The continuous rebuilding history of Supilinn dates back to the first half of the 18th century. More intensive construction periods are visible in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The majority of buildings are from the period 1870 to 1914. The housing area constructed by the people (see Figure 2), includes small apartment buildings dating from before the Soviet occupation of Estonia and detached houses built during the occupation.

The layout of the streets originates in the first part of the 19th century. There are different types of street configurations in Supilinn: some are developed organically following the landscape forms (for example, Tähtvere street follows the slope of the ancient bed of the Emajõgi River and Kroonuaia street follows the Medieval city moat) and other streets were traditionally planned (for example, Herne, Marja, and Kartuli). Property boundaries are visible from the earliest maps from the late 18th century (Estonian Historical Archives, 1792).

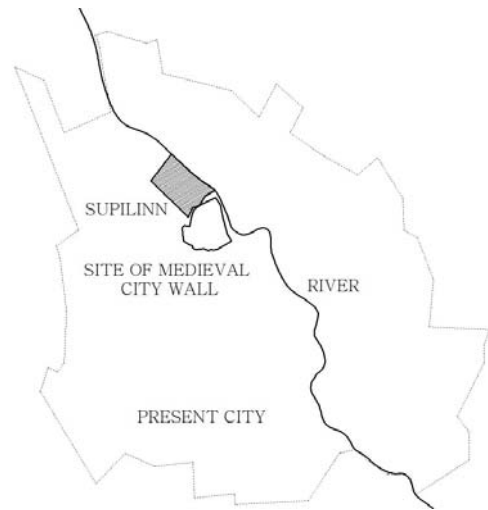


Figure 1: Supilinn located next to the city center of Tartu, directly behind the previous city wall



Figure 2: View of Supilinn
Source: Nutt (2010)

During the following years, properties have continuously been subdivided, but the historical layout of properties is still prevalent. This means that the shorter side fronts the street and the longer one stretches to the center of the quarter.

Supilinn survived in both, World War I and World War II. Between the wars, during the period of the Republic of Estonia, construction in Supilinn continued in a slow motion – about one building per year. That tempo continued throughout the Soviet times until 1991.

Supilinn did not broaden from its boundaries. The border from the north is a landscape (recreation park in the present time), which has never been built upon, and there are no residences planned upstream along the river.

Various building regulations have influenced the impression of the region today. One of the first was the 1776 act of the government of the province of Livonia, where in addition to the stone houses in the town center the rules were laid for the construction of wooden houses in the suburbs (Teedema, 2010). Later, in the 20th century, the area was considered valueless, and no effort was made to upgrade building conditions in the neighborhood.

Due to the lack of planning and centrally guided construction, order and disarrangement/ entropy remains in clear contrast in Supilinn making the city experience infinite (Maiste, 2010). The buildings, which were built during the period of Tsarist Russia, dominate in the area; of the buildings that survived until our time more than 70% were built before the 1930s (the period of pre-modernism). It is hard to find an equally well preserved, uniform urban environment from the same time period in all of Estonia. The houses built during the Republic of Estonia, approximately 15% of all buildings, add some additional spice. Almost the same amount of buildings were constructed during the Soviet period. Approximately 70% of buildings in Supilinn are more than 100 years old and they are close to the city center.

Tabel 1: Numbers of buildings by decade

Residential building construction period	Number of main buildings
Buildings constructed until 1930 (representing the Russian Empire period)	230
Buildings constructed between 1930 and 1950s (representing the Estonian interwar republic period)	50
Buildings constructed after 1960 (representing the Soviet period and the independent Estonian republic from 1991)	50
Total	330

Source: Hiob and Nutt (2010)

Also, architectural renovation and reconstruction of buildings impact the general picture of the district. If we look at the Tsarist building stock separately, then the buildings with authentically preserved or little refurbished count for more than 80%; the other 20% from the Tsarist period are widely modified. The older buildings are located closer to the center, while the modified buildings are spread throughout the district.

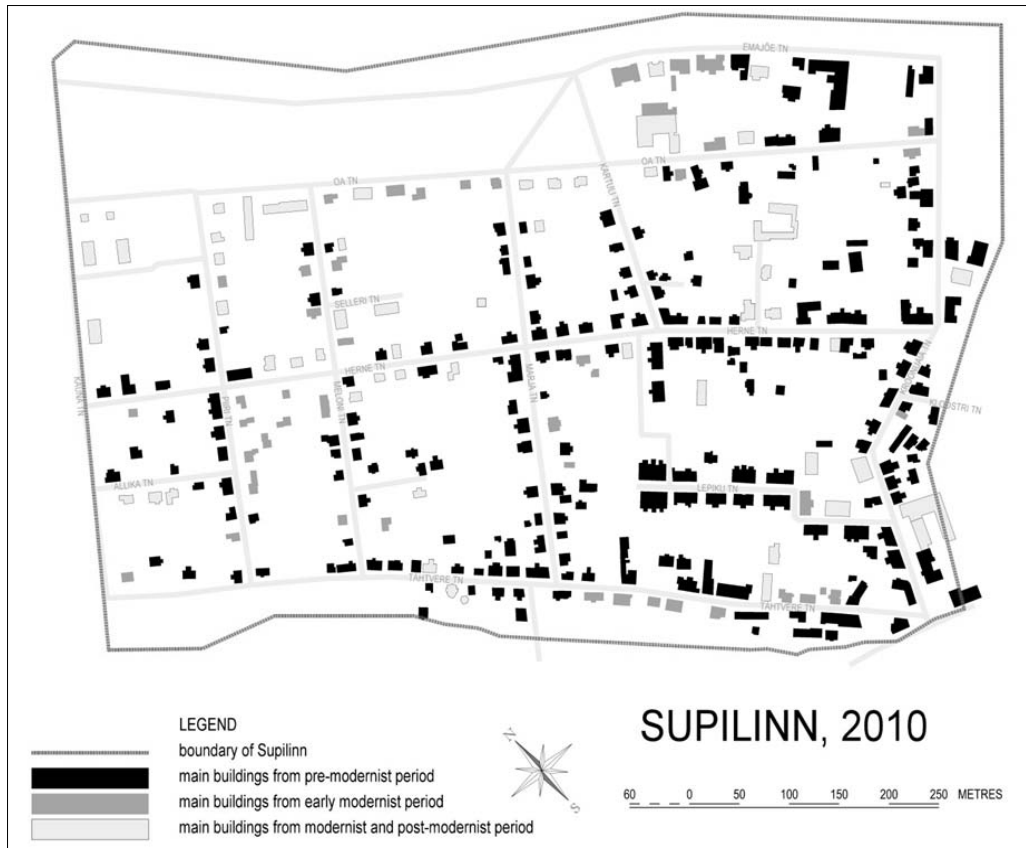


Figure 3: Map of Supilinn, 2010. Three construction periods are represented in Supilinn – pre-modernist 1800-1927, early modernist 1928-1955, and modernist and post-modernist 1956-2010

Source: Hiob and Nutt, 2010

Table 2: Renovation permits

The historical and architectural value of main buildings	Number of main buildings
Very valuable/well preserved pre-modern building	97
Valuable/not changed notably pre-modern building	90
Less valuable/notably spoiled pre-modern building	43
Total Tsarist period buildings	230

Source: Hiob and Nutt, 2010

The dominating land use in Supilinn has always been a residential one. About three-quarters of the buildings are small, with fewer than 10 flats per apartment building. The remaining quarter of the buildings represents detached single-family houses (Preem, 1986).

The traditional wooden construction is the typical building of Supilinn. In the 19th century, compulsory facade regulations were inspired by classical principals of symmetry and rhythm. The main construction material is timber covered with boards.

There are usually high gable roofs, windows with vertical proportions, and occasional simple decorations. The buildings in Supilinn are modest, but the variety of one- and two-story buildings produces a more unique environment than Karlova, another wooden neighborhood in Tartu.



Figure 4: An apartment building at 33 Tähtvere Street. This building possess typical features of wooden houses in Supilinn, including two stories with small apartments (one room flat with integrated kitchen), simple symmetrical façade, gable roof, wooden cladding and traditional proportions on windows (with shutter) and doors.

Source: Nutt, 2010



Figure 5: A small house at 34 Emajõe 3. This building possess typical features of wooden houses in Supilinn, including one story with rooms on loft, symmetrical façade, gable roof, wooden cladding and traditional proportions on windows.

Source: Nutt, 2010

The years of independence in the first half of the 20th century were of great importance both to the development of Tartu and Supilinn. The construction of marvelous buildings for high-income urban citizens was evident, in Tartu generally. In the same time, the appearance of modernist architecture degraded the value of buildings in Supilinn, because the old wooden housing were considered less valuable and as a result the neighborhoods' reputation suffered.

During the Soviet occupation this disparaging attitude prevailed, which led to the decline of the district. Supilinn was characterized as a deteriorated district, where the outcasts (and poor people) live and designated for demolition.

2. Politics of development

Throughout the Soviet occupation, consistent yet inadequate attention was paid to the Supilinn district. Many plans and ideas were considered, but none materialized. A combination of lack of funding and low priorities worked to protect the authentic and unique character of this area; in essence, the lack of action proved highly beneficial almost a century later.

During the Soviet occupation, when apartment houses with central heating emerged in the Tartu's Annelinn district it was not especially popular to live in Supilinn's houses with no amenities. Initial plans drawn up during the Soviet occupation called for the housing stock in Supilinn to be upgraded.

Under the Stalinist regime after World War II the Soviet towns were rebuilt in grandiose style. In Supilinn wide streets and new facades on the streets were proposed.

In the 1950s new plans (Soans, 1956; updated Soans, 1959) promoted the demolition of all existing structures and building a new street arrangement with the central square on main crossing. Also new functions like a school and green areas along with new 2 - and 3 - story buildings were introduced.

In the 1960s with new, more realistic housing policy, the plans preserved the structures which did not need much renovation (Solomatina and Reissar, 1963; Solomatina, 1965). However, in Supilinn most of the houses were considered in poor condition and suitable for demolition. A new traffic solution with multi-level streets was proposed which would mean large demolitions of existing housing.

In the next decade, during the 1970s, the modernist approach introduced radical changes to be carried out – the street network was to be redesigned with one new loop street for motorized traffic and the rest was designated for pedestrian traffic only. The closest street to the town center was planned as a main traffic road fringed by parking areas. Traditional housing was to be replaced by housing tower blocks in open landscape. The new function in addition to residential use implied the administrative buildings for Tartu State University and government. The Old Town Preservation Plan (Kivi, 1978) valued only masonry buildings and accordingly all wooden houses were assigned for dismantling.

The 1980s saw a modest preservation introduced in the plans (Voolaid, 1986). Three key areas in Supilinn were proposed as valuable and the street network was preserved, although the street corridors were widened with the demolition of houses. Selected houses were conserved in all streets and new facilities were placed inside large city blocks. The area was to be designated mostly for the residential use with public functions closer to the city center.

As it can be noted, all the plans, going back almost half a century, called for the destruction of older residential homes and widening of streets. The fruition of any of the above plans would have destroyed Supilinn's unique character. However, none of the above mentioned plans were ever realized. Thus, at the end of Soviet occupation, Supilinn remained a small district, located close to the city center where the Tsarist time urban design principles were authentically preserved. So through chaos and neglect, the 1990s saw new beginnings and opportunities for Supilinn.

3. The people of Supilinn: then and now

In the middle of the 18th century the plot owners in Supilinn were mainly the city government or prosperous citizens, clergy and nobles. Plots were widely used as gardens and for grazing animals. Lot owners themselves generally did not live locally. Renters, particularly non-German, ordinary people and craftsmen lived in the neighborhood. At the end of 18th century a large number of the land owners were considered of ordinary decent. According to the 1793 census there were about 100 men (women and children not included) in Supilinn, most of who were Estonians (Teedema, 2010). In 1807 there were about 250 inhabitants in total (Teedema, 2010), many of whom were artisans and other craftsmen.

In the second half of the 19th century construction escalated in Supilinn and the population increased. Closer to the center there were people of higher social position owning the most valuable plots, as evidenced by the fact that in the 1880s many local enterprises and shops (Teedema, 2010) were built and some of the first telephone connections in Tartu were in Supilinn (Teedema, 2010).

The social composition of Supilinn has always been heterogeneous. An availability of low-cost apartments meant that the district has always been popular among low-income people, including students and artists. Historically, higher-income households were located closer to the town centre, along Emajõe, Tähtvere and Kroonuaia Streets. Today, about 2,000 people live within the historical borders of Supilinn (Tartu City Government, 2008a).

The gender-specific composition of the Supilinn habitants is very similar to other parts of the city of Tartu (slightly more women (54%) than men (46%)), but the age-specific composition differs distinctively from other districts. Comparing other districts with Supilinn, there are more children (aged 0-6; 3,8% more than the average of Tartu) and youngsters (aged 7-18; 3,5 % more than the average of Tartu) and less elderly people (over 65; 7,5% less than average of Tartu) (Tartu City Government, 2010). Looking at the trends over the past five years, there has been a steady trend of population rejuvenation.

The reputation of Supilinn started to improve. According to a city survey, Supilinn was considered unsuitable for urban residences by 60% of the population in 1998. This changed dramatically within a decade. In 2008 only 25% of the population of the city of Tartu was of the same opinion (Tartu City Government, 2008b). New concerns that the neighborhood was slowly gentrifying were being voiced. Furthermore this trend of gentrification was also visible in other areas such as the physical environment and values of current residents. The neighborhood was growing again, but this time it was outsiders moving in. Some because they were curious about the neighborhood character, others because they could see themselves as preservationists, and still others who just wanted a cheaper place to live. While the physical morphology was still intact, the occupants were different and diverse. There was need for a bottom up, know your neighbors, create a common sense of values, type of movement. The citizens were restless and the timing was right.

4. The creation of Supilinn festival and Supilinn society

One of the earliest activities of this bottom-up movement was to organize a street festival known as 'Supilinn Days'. The initiators were mostly artists inspired by the idea of an alternative scene (Supilinna Society, 2011a). 'Supilinn Days' became identified with the neighborhood spirit, because it all started with that festival that brought together people that appreciated the unique character of Supilinn for the first time. Residents were becoming more aware of the physical values and the need to protect it as a special place. Within weeks, involved citizens organized themselves to form a neighborhood group which came to be known as the Supilinn Selts. Certainly, the festival and the society have raised a sense of belonging. The creative people who saw a challenge in

organizing an avant-garde festival acted very vocally, attractively and interestingly. In Supilinn, the artists were supported by intellectuals and professionals who took organizational responsibility to provide sustainability and long term commitment to place.

Today it is hard to imagine that only a few decades ago the only possible future for Supilinn was demolition (Soans, 1956; Soans, 1959). Supilinn is now the only district in Tartu, with an up to date comprehensive development plan. Supilinn stands out from other districts of the city due to its strong civic minded society where people are willing and able to talk and discuss their living environment. Supilinna Selts, a volunteer based neighborhood organization consisting of the residents of Supilinn and its supporters, has brought about enough visibility and pressure to Tartu city government to amend the then current (Tartu Linnavolikogu, 2001) comprehensive/ master plan for the Supilinn district because they felt that it lacked sufficient conservation and protection terms for buildings, including density and floor area ratios (Tartu Linnavolikogu, 2007). So in 2007, Tartu City Government initiated a new thematic planning project for the protection and use of Supilinn district's building areas and specification for the district's general requirements land use. This new planning project consisted of exhaustive analyses of the area and opinion polls (Hiob and Nutt, 2010) which were carried out for the first time. These efforts continue today with additional opinion surveys and revised regulations (Supilinn Society, 2011b).

A survey conducted in 2006 for the project called 'Supilinn promotion/ development plan/ program' (Supilinna Society, 2006) drew out the following values and perceptions for the neighborhood:

- Historic settlement pattern with preserved plot boundaries; original buildings; street corridors with street-space and a preserved proportion of green areas and water elements.
- A historic, well-preserved, unique wooden district in Tartu, characterized by its simplicity and moderately designed environment;
- Sustainable and holistic way of life attributed to the natural character of the neighborhood and its genuine, friendly people;
- Strong sense of belonging within the neighborhood. People consider themselves to be 'citizens of Supilinn'; and
- A sense of social diversity and tolerance within the existing population;

These values were reiterated in a recent survey conducted in 2010, organized as part of the 'Analysis of spatial formation/ development in Supilinn' and from proposals for compiling the thematic plan project (Hiob and Nutt, 2010). The most frequent positive associations and values were 'natural setting' (simple life/ natural life or close to nature) followed by 'proximity to city center' (7 minutes of walking from the middle of Supilinn to Raekoja plats, the main square) and the 'historic character or milieu' were considered as important value along with 'integrity' and 'the sense of community'. This was in accordance with the 2006 survey.

The Supilinn Society, representing its population, is the first of its kind in Estonia. It has set a good example for creating similar neighborhood organizations in Tartu as well as in other towns in Estonia. According to the statute, the aim of the Supilinn Society is to preserve the character of the neighborhood and improve the living environment for its inhabitants. In addition to collecting and archiving the historical data and unique information related to the district, the Society is able to act as the intermediary between residents, and decisive bodies as well as the wider public. The Society also aims to bring about cohesion within neighborhood residents by fostering community building through social activities such as the yearly Festival of Supilinn and the publication of the society's newspaper – Supilinna Tirin (Tureen of the Soup Town). The new challenge is preserving the character for future generations. As seen in the population survey mentioned earlier, one of the biggest concerns is protecting the neighborhood from increasing pressures of gentrification.

5. Understanding gentrification

In urbanism literature the changing process of deprived neighborhoods into a popular and prosperous district is most often called gentrification. The term gentrification was invented by German-born British sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1960s (Griffith, 1996; Atkinson, 2004; Brouillette, 2009). Its role in urban processes' causes and consequences has been debated ever since. The term was applied to the phenomenon of upper middle class households purchasing properties in rundown working class neighborhoods of London like Islington. Glass considered the changes to be negative for the original residents who were squeezed out. Generally, gentrification was not perceived as a threat in the beginning but the threat was the flight of white middle class and disinvestment in town centers (Griffith, 1996; Betancur, 2002). Gentrification may completely change the character of a neighborhood in a short time transforming it from a neglected, rundown district to a trendy, upscale representation of middle class wealth and success (Griffith, 1996). Many authors have emphasized both positive and negative sides of gentrification (Caulfield, 1989; Smith, 1986; Lees, 2000; Atkinson, 2004 etc.).

Gentrification has been linked to public policy interventions to reduce the process of urban decline even though research evidence suggests that gentrification has been a largely negative process driven by capital accumulation and resulting in the breaking-up and displacement of poorer communities (Anderson *et al.*, 2005; Atkinson, 2004). Neil Smith even suggests that gentrified areas are combat zones where new middle class pushes out working class people by force (Lees, 2000). The well documented negative sides are: original residents' displacement, loss of affordable housing and consequent homelessness accompanied by community conflict and eviction (Atkinson, 2000; 2004). Residents resisting the changes in the neighborhood frequently clash with the supporters of the gentrification, mostly private real estate development companies and government (Betancur, 2002). Most radical authors consider gentrification as a form of the criminalization of homelessness (Amster, 2003).

On the positive side, the rehabilitation of the physical fabric of the housing is mentioned as well as the change of image of a neighborhood associated with renewal

and further investment. Altered preconceptions about the social ecology of an area such as the deconcentration of poverty or relative increase in the social mix may also occur (Atkinson, 2004). The official policies often aim to this change of image even though it does generally not benefit the current residents who are mostly displaced. Sometimes gentrification helps to avoid demolition of a historical district as new residents put value on the environment as it is (Männik, 2008). In addition, increased property values, and thereby larger tax revenues and wider span of local services have been mentioned as positive sides of gentrification (Atkinson, 2004). Gentrification has also been conceived as a growth strategy that supposedly improves places by removing problem people and land uses and replacing them with better ones (Niedt, 2006). The improvement of the tax base has been claimed to be the satisfactory reason to encourage and even implement gentrification as a strategy of neighborhood change. According to John J. Betancur, collaboration between government and the private sector should steer gentrification as a strategy against emigration of white ethnics, disinvestment and restructuring (Betancur, 2002).

The controversy of gentrification may be exemplified by so-called positional paradoxes: many new, young, and professional residents are very concerned about gentrification in the neighborhood; yet new, young, professional residents are a major cause of gentrification, and the older residents who are most affected by gentrification are encouraged by the new, young residents and the energy they bring to the neighborhood (Koschmann and Laster, 2011). One, often underestimated, result of gentrification is the change of the identity of a place. Place attachment and belonging to a community are essential criteria of wellbeing for many people (Corcoran, 2002). In the gentrification process the identity is often changed to being unrecognizable, sometimes helped along by unprofessional planners who do not acknowledge the context enough (Kotval, 2005). The need to maintain places as stable, secure and unique entities is one of the main topics discussed in the current paper. Both physical and sociocultural aspects of the place have to be considered. The best way for building social capital and preserving community coherence is by community participation in the decision making processes that concern the future of the neighborhood (Crawford *et al.*, 2008).

The Supilinn Society understands these pressures and phenomena. They strive hard for community participation and cohesiveness. The new residents, for the most part, are embracing the idea of preservation and a minimalistic lifestyle. While signs and concerns for gentrification are evident, the Society is working actively to stop the displacement of residents and promote a common set of values. What differentiates Supilinn Selts and other societies is that the lifestyle in Supilinn has been especially embraced. It is not a question of collecting credits by being active in the Society, but a choice of lifestyle. Membership consists of people who are not living in Supilinn, but who care about preservation and this unique community character. The president of the Republic of Estonia is also a member and he is very active supporter of the concept of civil society. The residents and the Society see a constant need to concentrate on urban planning topics, since Supilinn faces continuing building pressure, despite the economic downturn.

6. In summary

So this is the story of Supilinn, the neighborhood that would not be destroyed. Its history spans centuries, its buildings have survived several booms and busts, its people are resilient and planning (or the lack of it) has preserved a unique neighborhood. A district, that barely survived, has been preserved, protected and enhanced as a livable community. While history shaped its physical morphology, the people gave it character and life. Supilinn exists today due to the perseverance and commitment of its residents.

Supilinn Selts, and the community behind it, has not only limited the tide of demolition but encouraged responsible renovation. It has aided in building community character and recognition through educational and cultural activities; it played a steadfast role, even when it had no official authority or power, in bringing the citizens' concerns to the decision making bodies. The society has been actively committed for 10 years in community building and preservation. It has finally been recognized as an official neighborhood organization by the local government.

While still completely voluntary, the society has grown in membership and activities and is seen as a catalytic force within the neighborhood.

The community, with a fairly well preserved milieu of buildings is diverse in its demographic makeup. While its popularity as a place to live is steadily rising, efforts to stop displacement are underway. Neighbors know each other, they watch out for each other, and help each other in need. While this is certainly not a place that stands still anymore, people are more aware of their environment and able to voice their likes and dislikes. For example, the new buildings (post 2005) primarily built on speculation by development companies were not in accordance with the community character. This spurred the local residents, through the Society, to convince the local government of the need for more restrictive planning and building regulations. While none of this came easy and it took a long time, local government has initiated a new comprehensive plan for the district and the residents are active players in the process. It is the only district in Tartu that has an on-going planning process, initiated for the second time since the 1990s.

Time and maturity also brings new concerns and threats. Supilinn is now an attractive neighborhood. Concerns about the 'newer' residents and their values are being voiced. Older residents and everyday people don't necessarily understand the planning process or the limitations of volunteer activity. They are starting to feel disconnected from the Society and its new professional standing. There is a feeling that too much is happening too soon and there is a desire to slow down and go back to the grass roots movement of community building through joint activities. The fear of gentrification and tipping the balance is real. Real estate prices have risen considerably, it is one of the few areas of the city where development is still ongoing and speculation still occurs. While change is inevitable, will the citizens of Supilinn succeed in protecting its historic character over the next decade? Ongoing opinion polls, and activities supported by the Society indicate that values haven't changed. People still embrace the village lifestyle, there is no apparent desire to pave roads or add street lights. Perhaps, if these values get coded

into building regulations, Supilinn will attract people with similar values. Constant education and citizen involvement will be needed to get to that point. The need to be inclusive and bring along a diverse group of people, to foster community spirit and to build local capacity are things that the Society will need to pay attention to, as it looks to the future. Ongoing activities will need to be balanced. Research on programs and regulations geared toward preservation will need to be balanced with continuing opinion polls that include both old and new residents. Community events such as Supilinn Days will become more important to building community spirit and awareness.

While these are the trials and tribulations of one small neighborhood in Estonia, it encapsulates a multi-faceted story. It raises many questions, some of them rhetoric while others practical. Is planning always desired? Is it advantageous to follow every fad or new idea regardless of context? Who do we need to plan for and how do we incorporate local values? Does culture and history play any role in our contemporary settlement patterns? Can a small group of concerned citizens change the course of history? Can we truly embrace a minimalistic, sustainable lifestyle in a world dominated by consumption? While we might not have concise or definitive answers, one thing is certain. Advocacy plays a major role in planning and community development. Organizational development and capacity building, especially in terms of place and space, play an important role. This case study is a testimony for the tenacity in time and commitment of people.

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