

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY  
Masters Programme in Geoinformatics for Urbanized Society

## Site Visit 1: Residential District Exploration in Tartu

### Urban Planning

Alex Jarvis



Karlova, the inner-city wooden housing district located directly South of Kesklinn, maintained high occupation rates through the 20th Century (Hess, 2011), but has become especially popular again since Estonian independence due to four key factors: its spatial location, the properties being affordable, its historical and heritage value to ethnic Estonians, and the sizes of the plots and the properties within them. The last factor (along with the regulations that stipulate that there should be no more than 10 flats per apartment) means that the wooden houses are in line with the resident's ideal dimensions for livability.



**Figure 1. Renovated apartment building on Tähe Street. Photo by Alex Jarvis.**

Compared to other inner City districts, Karlova appears to have relatively unregulated planning and yet it has been regulated from its conception. The Karlova Society's preservation efforts have ensured that regulations have only been

increased. Karlova's traditional and unkept feel is rather unique within urban zones, leading it to exceed my expectations. Rønne, the gentrified capital of Bornholm, provides a potential guide on how to upgrade the buildings whilst maintaining the community vibe and traditional architecture. Figure 1 shows a traditional wooden apartment building that has undergone a full renovation in keeping with its original materials and colours. By contrast, the constructed modern apartments opposite Karlova Manor and the initiation of modern residences on the informal park zone between Pargi, Päeva and Tähe streets reduce such hopes.

Karlova is intriguing for its wide variety of plots shapes and sizes, buildings within them, street layouts and visible transportation. Many plots have more than one building on them (aside from outhouses and woodsheds). In many instances, the quieter properties that do not connect with the pavements are not only more ornate in design but are in better and/or renovated condition. Figure 2 shows a fine example of this. The landlords of the street-facing tenements typically occupied such houses.

On Kesk Street, it would appear that some of the properties are single occupancy. However, for the majority of the properties on the three chosen streets for this study, they are divided into apartments, as per the original intention (ibid). Therefore, the potential use of gardens is intriguing. Despite the snow, it was possible to see that some plots, within their wooden fences, have put greater emphasis on the gardens for recreational or permaculture purposes than others, which are essentially compressed mud or gravel car parks. Some of the plots on Kesk Street clearly have vegetable plots and one property had decking. However, during the winter months, there appears to be little action within them.



**Figure 2. Two buildings on one plot. Photo by Alex Jarvis**

It is clear, as stated by Hess (2011), that the district has seen some changes in street-level usage. There is evidence of commercial premises that have been converted to residences, with the diagonal doorways and overhanging second storeys.

The district has very different levels of maintenance. Housing associations collect repair funds from apartment owners on a monthly basis in order to pay for the renewal of cladding, roof and windows. Many properties await such overhauls and not all are as thorough as the example in figure 3. Some of the properties are dilapidated. Some buildings exteriors require urgent attention. The stone-like plaster has crumbled, exposing wooden cross-hatching and log structures that are visibly rotten. A common issue is the poor installation of windows that do not fit flush within the walls. A cheap-looking orange filler is a common botch-job in such circumstances to reduce draft. It is notable that the majority of new windows are



wooden. Plastic frames tend to be used in properties where the renovation work appears to have been (part) completed on a smaller budget.



**Figure 3. Apartment building on Kesk Street undergoing significant renovation.**  
Photo by Alex Jarvis.

The streets themselves show differing levels of maintenance and thought for pedestrians. Compared to Tāhe Street, Kesk and Tolstoi Street were very icy. This was partly due to the lack of a communal drainage system. The properties gutters pour water onto the street, which leads to additional ice during the cold months. Also, with the snow not having been cleared from the pavements, anyone with a buggy, bike or wheelchair would struggle to use them. Yet, Tolstoi's trees have been uniformly maintained, to ensure they do not block road traffic or connect with the buildings.

At the time and day of visit (13.00 on a regular Thursday afternoon), one could not observe enough people to even partially understand the district's demographics. However, the differing values of vehicles on Kesk Street did provide a clue to the wealth of the residents, if one assumes that the vehicles belong to the residents. Some older vehicles clearly had not moved for a while, given the build-up of ice around the wheels. Such observations were so not possible on Tolstoi Street, which despite the lack of parking spaces compared to residences, was fairly empty at the time of visit.

The area of Tāhe street that has become trendy (with the well-known pub 'Barlova') has a cluster of commercial stores, cafes and bars. This is juxtaposed with the concrete derelict shop, as shown in figure 4, which was built during the Soviet years. One gets the impression that should there have been greater demand for further amenities, they would have utilised this space somehow. The aforementioned 'trendy' businesses have been established for 5-10 years now.



**Figure 4. Derelict Soviet-era shop at the junction where Pargi and Lootuse Street meet T  he Street. Photo by Alex Jarvis.**

Karlova's central zone for leisure is the elevated park. At the time of visit, the park area was empty and in my experience is underused. The topography of the park and the age of the trees make it an interesting area. I find it unfortunate that separate from this, the land between Pargi, Päeva and Tähe streets is being constructed on. At the time of the visit, established trees were being felled. To have had an unmaintained open space like this in the city centre was unusual. On a foggy or snowy evening, to cut between Kalevi to Tähe streets meant a walk through the darkness of the trees towards the emerging lights of the wooden Villa Margherita Boutique Hotel and restaurant. The fluorescent cuboids of the new development will remove such a sense of exploration and emergence into the heart of the old-fashioned wooden district in question.

## Bibliography

Hess, D. B. (2011). EARLY 20TH-CENTURY WOODEN TENEMENT BUILDINGS IN ESTONIA: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR NEIGHBORHOOD LONGEVITY. *Urbanistika ir arhitektūra* , 35 (1), 110-116.

Hess, D. B., & Hiob, M. (2013). Preservation by Neglect in Soviet-Era Town Planning in Tartu, Estonia . *Journal of Planning History* , 13 (1), 24-49.