DOI: 10.12838/fam/issn2039-0491/n69-70-2024/1082

Merilin Tee, Gregor Taul

"You need to see the space where you can feel infinitely comfortable to know what an architect can do at all". Interview with Estonian Architect Siiri Vallner

Abstract
Siiri Vallner is an architect who started her studies at the Estonian Academy of Arts in the early 1990s. She was among the first to embark on exchange studies to Copenhagen and later continued her studies at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. After her studies, Vallner spent a year working as an architect in New York. In 2002 she and her colleagues founded the architecture office *KavaKava*. In 2008 she received the Young Architect Award and the accompanying travel scholarship which she used to undertake a Grand Tour to Italy, Greece, the Middle East and India. This interview took place in spring 2024 as part of the Erasmus+ funded research project *Updating the Grand Tour. Memory and Invention of the European Built Environment* and focused on how travel affects architectural studies and meaning-making.

Keywords
Estonian architecture — Grand Tour — Siiri Vallner

Siiri Vallner (b. 1972 in Tallinn) is an architect whose projects have left a strong mark on the image of contemporary Estonian architecture (Lige 2015). Vallner started her studies at the Estonian Academy of Arts in the early 1990s. It was a time of transition in Estonian architecture[1]. If during the Soviet era architecture was centralised and nearly entirely at the service of the state, now the country moved to the other extreme. Virtually anything that could be privatised was privatised, and for the first 10-15 years, construction was largely directed by the private sector looking for quick income. It was a time of turmoil for the government sector and the underfunded arts and architecture education. In this anxious situation, Vallner was one of the first to embark on exchange studies to Copenhagen, where the Danish government had a special study program for foreigners, where teachers (among others Jan Gehl – the world-famous urbanist and an advocate of good public space) preached about the architecture and urban planning of the welfare state through in-depth tours.

A few years later, Vallner set off to Washington DC to study at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Jaan Holt, an Estonian expat, served as a professor of architecture there and helped to organize scholarships for Estonian students. Holt himself had been a student of Louis Kahn and Kahn's long-time 'personal' engineer August Komendant[2]. While Kahn had left Estonia as an infant, Komendant left Estonia as an adult during the Second World War.

This Holt-Komendant-Kahn "bloodline" has been an important narrative in Estonian architecture, as on the one hand it has helped to bridge the discontinuity between the current period and the independence preceding Second World War, while on the other hand, it has sought to reinstate the

DOI: 10.12838/fam/issn2039-0491/n69-70-2024/1082

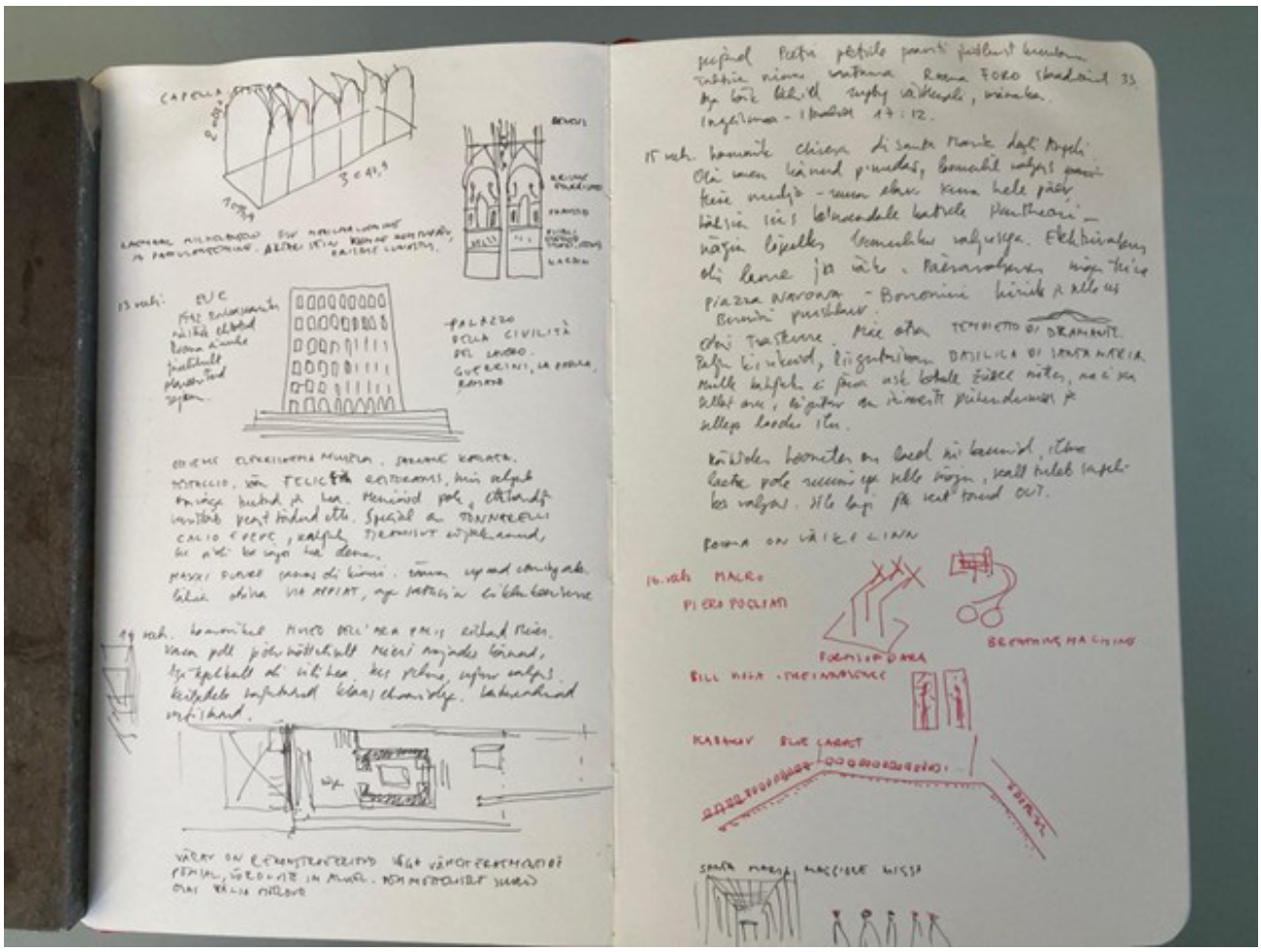

Fig. 1
Siiri Vallner, Sketchbook drawings from Greece.

country with the mainstream of modern architecture from which it was forcibly separated for half a century.

After her studies, Vallner spent a year living in New York, working in an architecture office. When she came back to Estonia, she founded the architecture office *KavaKava* together with her colleagues. In 2004 Estonia joined the European Union, which initiated the construction of many public buildings and infrastructure projects through various support programmes. The appearance of Estonian architecture in the last twenty years is largely the result of high-level architectural competitions for EU-co-funded public building, where Vallner has picked up many prize-winning places[3]. In 2008, when she received the Young Architect Award and the accompanying travel scholarship, she undertook a classic grand tour through Italy, Greece and the Middle East to India.

This interview was conducted in May 2024 as part of the research project *Updating the Grand Tour. Memory and Invention of the European Built Environment.* The interview took place in *KavaKava*'s office, in one of the early-20th century wooden houses of the Kalamaja district of Tallinn. On a more general level the interview focused on how travel affects architectural studies and meaning-making. Considering the Estonian specificity of the interview, it is important to mention the name of Jaan Holt, who was mentioned several times in the interview, and the contribution of the Virginia Tech School of Architecture to the development of Estonian architecture in the decades following the restoration of independence.

Gregor Taul: *The aim of our conversation is to talk about the Grand Tour and travelling in Europe and beyond. Yet, one does not have to go abroad*

to experience architecture. In order to have a deep spatial experience, it can sometimes be enough to leave the classroom and see a building on site. Perhaps we could start with your architectural studies and move chronologically from there. Would you talk about your studies at the Estonian Academy of Arts (EKA) and about your first study trips abroad?[4]

Siiri Vallner: I started my studies in the 1990s and I think that travelling was really different compared to the way it is today. Society itself was very, very different[5].

If one managed to go somewhere, the effect was much more influential. On the other hand, there wasn't, and couldn't have been, any planning or forethought - you just had to take your chances.

The first place I went to study abroad was Copenhagen. I studied there for one semester and it was so radically unlike the way we were studying at the time, that I couldn't even put the two experiences together. In fact, I didn't dare to talk about it with others – I thought they would laugh at me. Now it seems so obvious, but back then I didn't have the tools to fully comprehend it or relate it to the Estonian context. Their approach was very people-centred and social, whereas in the 1990s, in Tallinn, people would jokingly refer to this kind of thinking as "hedgehog architecture" – where one supposedly grasps the world from below, rather than above.

In any case, I got a good taste of this perspective, because what I learnt in the lectures was confirmed in the urban space. The Danes had a special programme for international students, with a clear intent on spreading their culture and architectural ideology. In addition to the lectures, we had a lot of study tours, where we went to see the same objects we had discussed in the classroom. Thus, we learnt through concrete examples how Danes, who were supposed to be even more introverted people than Estonians, have created an open and friendly society through architecture. It was through these visits to architectural works that I genuinely realised for the first time that actual understanding comes from experience not theory. I can study something for a hundred hours in the classroom, but when I see and experience it for an hour on the spot, the impact is so much greater.

GT: *Although the Erasmus mobility programme was established in 1987, Estonia joined in 1998 and the first students participated only in 1999*[6]*. Student mobility also took place during the Soviet era when the partner universities were from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. The 1990s were an intermediate period in that previous links had been broken and new ones had not yet been established. Did students seek out exchange studies opportunities themselves, or were they helped to do so by, for example, the then dean Veljo Kaasik?*[7]

SV: Back then, there were no Erasmus or other programmes. I can't remember where this Danish opportunity came from[8]. I think it may have been thanks to Veljo Kaasik. Two students from our course went to Denmark, and later Oliver Alver also went on the same programme[9].

GT: *Did you have the opportunity to practice as an architect and was there perhaps even a danger that Copenhagen would take you in and you wouldn't come back?*

SV: I was only in my third year at the time and the idea hadn't occurred to me. But when I went to study in the US in 1998, they did have this American practical approach of attracting foreign students and then giving them short-term work permits. It is good for them to have a lot of energe-

tic highly skilled young people that they can use, but who will soon leave and not retire there. I took advantage of this opportunity by working both during and after my studies.

GT: *Am I right that you were in Copenhagen during your third year, then came back to Tallinn, did your fourth year and then headed to the US?*
SV: Yes, I finished the fourth year at EKA. The funny thing about our course was that just when we were finishing, there was a reform in higher education from a four-year programme to a 3+2 Bologna system. Our course got caught in the middle of the process. I think it's not common knowledge, but we finished in four years without doing a master's thesis. Later on, our diplomas were equated with a Master's degree. So we have about 15 architects who write MA after their name but who in a way don't have a master's degree. It was so vague at the time because some of us actually started the fifth year, but then the school did not know what to do with us. So, at the beginning of that fifth year, I had the chance to go to study in the US.

GT: *You mentioned how radically different Estonia's economic situation was compared to Denmark. How did you manage? I can imagine that it was easier to get by in the left-wing, bohemian Copenhagen than in the elegant capital of the United States?*
SV: Actually, everything in Copenhagen was neatly organised for us by the programme. I was living with a host family and had a scholarship and other privileges. I did well there. In the US, on the other hand, it was easier because I could work. But to be honest, in those days, it wasn't like you went somewhere and your mum or dad gave you the money. You had to manage on your own.
Although, of course, Jaan Holt's support was solid. At that time, the architecture department was away from Virginia Tech's main campus in a small space in Washington DC. It was a tiny school where – you might say – Jaan Holt's ideology reigned. It was important for him to invite students and visiting faculty from all over the world, who would spend a year or two there and then move on.

GT: *Who else from the EKA students went there?*
SV: Before me, Toomas Tammis had been there as a student and Andres Alver as a lecturer. Hanno Grossschmidt was there at the same time as me. Tomomi Hayashi, who came to Estonia also studied there. I don't remember at the moment, but there must have been more[10]. As there were few options before the Erasmus period, it was a definite and very good choice.

GT: *On the one hand, Jaan Holt's contribution was clear and practical – through him, a whole generation had the opportunity to study and work in the United States and develop professionally in very different circumstances. On the other hand, something poetic and mythological goes hand in hand with his name.*
SV: It is very mythological!

GT: *Yes, the fact that he was a student of Louis Kahn and August Komendant. How did you perceive that at the time, and how do you explain this connection to yourself in retrospect?*

DOI: 10.12838/fam/issn2039-0491/n69-70-2024/1082

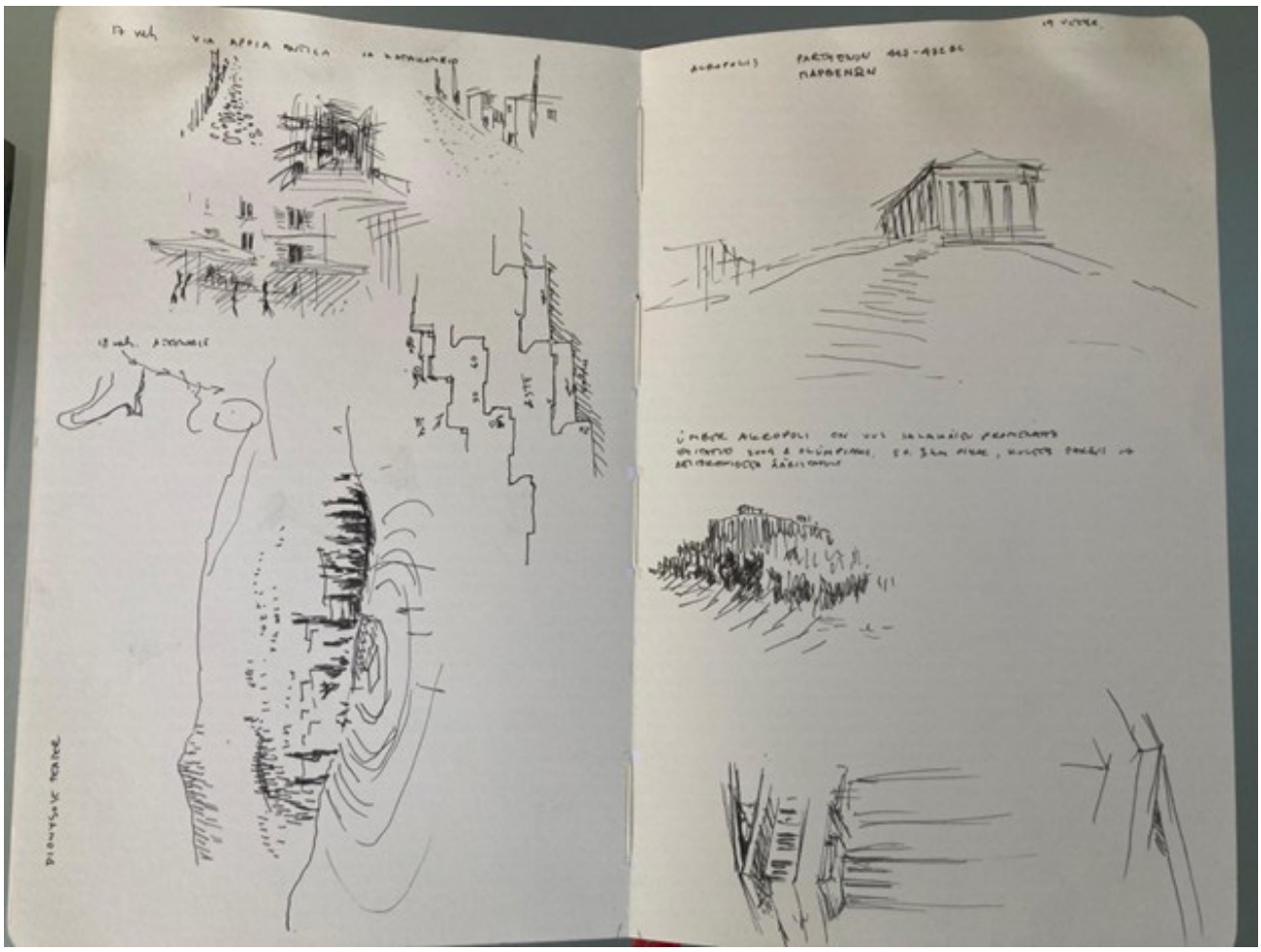

Fig. 2
Siiri Vallner, Sketchbook drawings from Greece.

SV: I admit that there's a clear "bloodline" theme. But if I now think about it from the Grand Tour perspective then I would actually connect this connection to the more medieval tradition of journeyman years of craftsmen rather than the travels of 18th century aristocrats. In this sense studying under Holt was more like a relationship between the master and the apprentice. If I need to categorise architecture, I see it as craft. Even though we do it with computers, it's a discipline where nothing happens without mind and hands. It's also person-centred as much is done and learnt individually. When I think about medieval times, it was the case that the apprentice had to go far away during his years of wandering – one couldn't go to the next village, but had to enter different cultures, had to practice with previously unknown masters. One local master was not enough.

GT: *In medieval Tallinn, masters seldom handed down their workshops to their sons. As the saying goes: «blood is thicker than water». If your own son messed things up, it was hard to throw him out of the house because of the family bonds. It was more useful to take on a travelling apprentice, with whom you could develop a respectful relationship based on professional merit.*
SV: Well, for example, one of the things that Holt thought was very important was drawing and sketching with your own hand. Because computers had already arrived and many people thought it was cool to model on screens, the analogue direction was not the most popular thing at that time. Although we were critical of Holt's obsession at the time, I still have a very strong attachment to sketching[11]. Of course, Holt worshiped Kahn, but Carlo Scarpa was also very important to him. That's why one of our

important teachers was Marco Frascari, who came from Scarpa's class[12]. Kahn's and Scarpa's sensibility is a bit similar, and that certainly came through in the teaching. If you would put it in the Estonian context, then... Well, I think we are a small country and such a focus on one or two greats would not work here as it would hijack the whole teaching. But if you have a country as big as the US, then it can work, because each school of architecture has its own identity and they can educate their students as followers of a specific school.
Yet, from a personal point of view it's of course a very special feeling when you know that the knowledge comes directly from the original source.

GT: *I imagine that studying in the US involved visiting Kahn's buildings around the country?*
SV: Yes, but it wasn't really organised by the school. Because I was such a decent student, I just did it all on my own. This was a big difference from my studies in Denmark, where experiencing architecture on the spot was a crucial part of the programme. In the US, we did it ourselves.

GT: *Did that mean driving the car criss-crossing the United States?*
SV: Basically yes – by train and by car. Actually I didn't get to see the west coast that much, but I still saw most of the important buildings by Kahn and it really had a big impact on me. Although I have to say that, just as I didn't dare to tell anyone about my experience when I had come back from Copenhagen, my experience in the US was again so difficult to comprehend that I didn't start talking about it with a big mouth back home. It was only 10-15 years later that the Danish architectural trend took off in a huge wave. Now, of course, I can pompously say that I have studied with Jan Gehl and that my understanding of public space was shaped directly by his words, but the truth is that immediately after Denmark, I did not consider it a matter of pride. I find it interesting.

GT: *Would you like to point out any other noteworthy lecturers or major differences in teaching methodology that you took with you from Denmark and the US?*
SV: I think that in the US the biggest influence on me was the fact that I stayed there for a year longer. I was absolutely sure that I wanted a big city experience and so I went to New York. It was like I had this urge that no matter what, I needed to understand what the metropolis meant. Because.. Here in Estonia at that time, we had Alver and Kaasik who talked about density and emphasised urbanity[13]. Of course, this mindset had got to me as well, and I wanted to experience this real density first hand, so that I could understand what they were actually talking about.
New York with its wild energy had everything – be it the kind of Danish-style social perspective or the genius of Louis Kahn. Nobody tutored me that year – except myself – but I took it as a lesson anyway. It was relatively difficult for me psychologically but at the same time I felt that I had to endure this difficult period. At that moment, Estonian architecture seemed to me to be very monotonous and I felt that I could not do anything about it if I did not get a completely different perspective.
If you want to get out of a certain system, one week or one month is not enough, it has to be longer, the change takes place over a longer period of time. Understanding long-term urban processes slowly takes shape within you. In Estonia and other smaller places, there is a danger that some things

are quickly and often superficially taken over one by one, and it is not understood how and for what reasons these principles developed.
Perhaps if you go through a painstaking learning process one time, next time you will understand some things quicker. Like, why some specific things happened in another place and if we wanted to do the same here it would take a different form because of the changes in content.
But talking about the Grand Tour, by the time I got the Young Architect Award in 2008 I had been practising for ten years[14]. Then I thought, well, now I'm going to do the real Grand Tour.
I'd been to all sorts of places, but not to the classical architectural sites. So I went to Rome, then on to Athens, then to Cairo, then on to Damascus, and then I had a free schedule after that.

GT: *Great! How did you prepare for this trip? Did you look up your old art history lecture notes? An acquaintance of mine went to Paris for the first time with a guidebook from the 1930s.*
SV: I could have read memoirs of some of the Grand Tourists of the 19th century beforehand, but I limited myself to just trying to see all these classic sites in a free-form way that I liked. But I did follow some traditions – like sketching. This sketching habit came from the US, where classical education was emphasised. But it really does help a lot if you take the time and go to the place you are studying and try to analyse it by sketching. An architect's sketch is different from an artist's sketch in the sense that you are trying to capture in your drawing the architect's idea and how that object functions in a more general way or how it's expressed in some detail. I tried to do it throughout my tour.
But from Egypt onwards I actually had to stop sketching because as soon as I sat down and took out my sketchbook I was surrounded by a crowd... You can also collect memories with a camera, but for me it's not the same.

GT: *How good of an archivist are you?*
SV: I try to keep the things that are important to me.

GT: *So you still have the drawings from that trip?*
SV: I still have the sketchbook. By the way, when I look at today's students, I'm surprised to see how much they use sketchbooks to do their coursework and collect ideas. Including first year students – someone must have taught them and stressed it to them. Some of them do it very nicely. But when we went to Helsinki with the students and we were there for two days, I saw that this was clearly too short a time. Well, for example, when we were at the Aalto studio and the Aalto home, we were given an hour's tour in each, but in that time you cannot even take your sketchbook out of your bag, let alone start sketching.

GT: *As we came upon the Aaltos, there is an important European architectural sub-narrative, or myth if you like, that comes to the fore. Alvar and Aino were deeply fascinated by the Italian small towns since their first trip to the country. Not wishing to generalise too much, one could say that they took the re-creation of this dense social fabric as their creative credo*[15]*. How about you, did you have time for small towns besides Rome, and did you have a special feeling about them?*
SV: Yes, it could be said that Jan Gehl's teaching is based on Italian cities

DOI: 10.12838/fam/issn2039-0491/n69-70-2024/1082

Fig. 3
Siiri Vallner, Sketchbook drawings from Greece.

and the analysis of communal life there, and how to apply it to colder climates and more sparsely populated places like Denmark. I think it is important to bear in mind that if you are born in Viimsi[16] and you are driven to school, to the gym and to the shopping centre for twelve years, you cannot have any idea of what a better urban experience might be. Even if we try to start a broader public debate on urban densification, there is a risk that if city users or officials or even architects have such a limited and car-centric view of city life, they will not be able to want better.

GT: *What influence did non-Western cultures have on you? Did you manage to alienate yourself from a cultural context you are familiar with?*
SV: I think that you can't really get out of your culture, out of your automatisms – or at least not that easily. But maybe you realise that you always have some kind of cultural glasses in front of you – no matter what you're looking at or evaluating or judging. That is an important realisation.

GT: *But here is another paradox. The proverb says that «before you go to Paris, visit Nuustaku»[17]. On the one hand, this saying warns against arrogance, but on the other hand it is just practical advice that you may not understand the bigger places until you are familiar with the small towns at home. Perhaps Paris itself needs Nuustaku more than the other way round?! Going back to the 1990s, do you recall any study trips within Estonia? Perhaps art history trips with professor Mart Kalm?[18]*

SV: We did, yes. I don't know if he still does them, but Kalm's tours were

very legendary at the time. He used to do these kinds of trips for about a week or a little less in the summers.

GT: *Yes, they are still going strong today. Although now, as far as I know, they last a day or two at the most.*
SV: We also had other summer practices.

GT: *Like painting practice?*
SV: We had a measuring practice in the Noarootsi area, but the painting practice we arranged ourselves. Somehow our course missed the official painting practice, so we decided that we would do it ourselves. Siiri Nõva was on our course and through her these opportunities opened up, both in the city and in the countryside. Siiri Nõva's home in Nõmme was actually the first time I experienced an architect's house[19]. Afterwards we also went to paint with Siiri Nõva at Aedla farm in Muuksi village, where we also got to live in the house, which offered many impressions[20].

GT: *It's a nice coincidence, because we have chosen Erika Nõva as one of the ten Estonian architects to be featured in our Grand Tour project, alongside you. Erika Nõva's home is also one of our case studies.*
SV: Getting to know Erika Nõva's house was a very special experience. In the winter of my first course, Siiri Nõva invited me to visit and the house struck me. In this sense, the Nõva house was like an introduction. The first architect's house I came across. But this house is the first in more ways than one. The first female architect, the first republic. Although I was certainly no national romantic myself. With this house, however, I reassessed for myself national romanticism. Before it seemed like such a silly thing to me, but when you experience it by sitting on those chairs and on that parquet floor and making fire in that fireplace then your view changes on it, completely[21].
A little bit on a different topic – on the way I travel. I decided at some point that I'm basically against cars and I don't want to own a car, a private car ever. Or maybe one day I will, but so far I haven't. In any case, I've tried to hold that line all along. I think it creates a different perspective to go through all the obstacles that come with it and that's why my travelling looks different in that I have to plan a lot more time to get somewhere. I have to plan different kinds of routes that normally people don't go through these days.
A lot of the time I go by bike and by train – first I take the train to wherever I can and then I cycle from there. At least that is how it is in Estonia. It takes a lot of time to get around, but it makes me see the world differently. I think that for people who see the country through the perspective of high roads, it can seem like some places are very far apart, but in fact if you go across one road to the other, things can be quite close.

GT: *Speaking of souvenirs, besides your own drawings, what have you brought back from your travels?*
SV: I think that If we look back on this conversation we can consider all these travel experiences as one big Grand Tour – and what I have taken with me from this journey is the architect that I have become. I don't think I could have become this architect by just studying here. At the same time, I really don't know if I would have become a different kind of architect, or if I wouldn't have become an architect at all. Maybe I would have been

interested in other subjects? Or maybe I would still have discovered these subjects later on? It is hard to imagine it all. In any case, all the topics that have accompanied me are my discoveries from these journeys. In that sense, travelling has been like a highway to the topics which are important for me.

GT: *But on a more trivial note, did you bring any artefacts? Any mementos that remind you of those trips?*
SV: Surely I must have something at home.. But.. At the same time, no, I can't think of any pieces of marble or artefacts of this kind. I don't know, I wonder if I have anything... (*Long pause*)
Wait, if you've interviewed other architects, do they have any particular objects or sculptures that they've brought with them?!

GT: *Well, it's a different kind of story, but when we went to interview Raine Karp at his home and asked him the same question, he also got stuck in the thought, but then he mumbled mischievously and said: whisky![22] As the drinks selection here was poor, and proper whisky tasted like the outside world, it was a perfect gift to share with friends. Afterwards, the empty whisky bottles remained as a souvenir of the trip. But as soon as the borders opened and the same products found their way into Estonian shops, he took them to the landfill because they lost their original meaning.*
SV: I don't know. I might have some books or some small things I had done in school that I took with me as mementos, but I don't remember any specific things.

GT: *I once had an Australian friend who, like many young people from there, took a trip to Europe and other parts of the world over a number of years. Wherever he was, he often visited post offices to send things home to Australia. When he finally got home, his helmet from India and other items were waiting for him. So getting attached to things can develop into hoarding, even at a distance. But changing the subject, and trying to perhaps "institutionalise" the Grand Tour, what do you think should be the locations that should necessarily be part of a Grand Tour? Let's say, for example, that it is a young architect's tour. Some specific buildings, some important names in architectural history?*
SV: The most important thing is that you have to be in a new place for a longer period of time, at least a year, for example. That is for sure. Just going through as many places as possible doesn't teach you that much, in my opinion.
To some extent it is important for students to visit certain important places, because when architects work together they need to speak a common language. But young people today, of course, have a lot more opportunities to travel and I think they choose very different routes, which is also a good thing. They put together their own itineraries from elements that they think they might need in their future.
But I would also add to this the aspect that, speaking as a lecturer, I am absolutely convinced that if we want to pass on the tradition that we have in our school, it is necessary for students to go travelling. It is part of the culture.

GT: *Have you always wanted to be a lecturer?*

SV: I'm not really a lecturer, I'm a visiting lecturer[23]. I didn't really aspire to be a lecturer, and I don't identify myself as an academic person. My identity is that of a practising architect – I am not an academic by inclination. But I look at it more in terms of being old enough to trust my life experience to pass on some knowledge. (*Long pause*)
Now when we went to Helsinki with the students and when they came out of the Aalto house with such thoughtful faces and sat there in the courtyard for a long time, I asked them, well, do you understand now why you weren't told these things before? They said yes – you need to go there and experience it on spot to understand. In short, we can spend a whole semester trying to talk to them about natural light, but if you haven't seen it with your own eyes what an architect can do with light, you're not going to get it. You're not going to understand what the lecturer is talking about. You need to see the space where you can feel infinitely comfortable to know what an architect can do at all.

Notes

[1] On this topic, see Ruudi 2020.
[2] Carl-Dag Lige's monograph (2022) offers a vivid overview of Komendant's career. See also Komendant's memoirs about his time spent working together with Kahn (Komendant 1975).
[3] On this topic, see e.g., Taul 2016.
[4] From the 1950s until the 2000s in Estonia architecture was taught at one institution – the Estonian Academy of Arts (during the Soviet period it was known as the State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR). The fact that architecture students have closely collaborated with the visual artists and have been actively involved in the alternative culture scene has left a strong imprint on the way the architecture community identifies itself.
[5] Estonia restored its independence in August 1991. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to rapid inflation and the extreme transition from socialist to free market economy during which most people lost their savings. In 1992, the average monthly wage in Estonia was 35 € in today's currency. The situation was not made any easier by the fact that Europe as a whole was in recession at the time. It was not until 1994 that the last Soviet troops left Estonia, and it was only at the end of the decade that the government managed to gain control over criminal groups and the shadow economy. On the other hand, the 1990s were a period of social, economic and cultural liberation, and even fantastic euphoria, which makes framing the zeitgeist of the era challenging. As much as there were lucky individuals who succeeded in their business, there were others, such as the tens of thousands of former state-owned factory workers who lost their jobs and found themselves in a serious state of abandonment.
[6] See Fedotov 2024.
[7] Veljo Kaasik (b. 1938) is an Estonian architect and lecturer. Being in dialogue with Robert Venturi and postmodern architectural theory, Kaasik was one of the first in Soviet Estonian to critically rethink the legacy of modernist space. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he headed the Faculty of Architecture at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Under his leadership, the thinking of the previous period was abandoned, many new and young architects took up teaching positions, relations were established with Western universities, and a conceptual approach and an urbanist view of architecture were introduced (Tammis 2014).
[8] Vallner's exchange was part of Denmark's International Study Program DIS. It was conceived in the 1950s to create links across borders for students in post-war Europe. Field studies and study tours became an integral part of programming in the 1980s. In the 1990s DIS started hosting students from Eastern Europe through the Danish Fund for Democratization (Woodfield 2009).
[9] Architect Oliver Alver (b. 1977) studied at the Estonian Academy of Arts from 1997 to 2001.

[10] Architects Mihkel Tüür (b. 1976) and Ivan Sergejev (b. 1987) also studied at Virginia Tech. Siiri Vallner invited Tomomi Hayashi (b. 1971) to Estonia where they initially worked together. Years later Hayashi and Grossschmidt (b. 1973) formed their own architecture office in Tallinn. As all of those mentioned have achieved important positions in Estonian architecture - be it as lecturers, chief city architects or practising architects - it can be said that the cooperation initiated by Jaan Holt has played a crucial role in the development of contemporary Estonian architecture.

[11] In Estonian architecture Siiri Vallner is known for her love of sketching. For example, in 2013, when philosopher and architecture lecturer Eik Hermann published an article on scribbling as a conceptual tool in spatial design, it was illustrated with ten pages of sketches by Siiri Vallner and Indrek Peil (Hermann 2013).

[12] Marco Frascari (1945-2013) studied with Carlo Scarpa at Venice IUAV University and received his PhD in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania. He served as a Professor of Architecture at Virginia Tech from 1998 to 2005. See Frascari, Hale and Starkey 2007.

[13] In 1998, they compiled their concepts and projects in a book that gives a good overview of the architectural ideals of the time (Alver et alii 1998).

[14] The Young Architect Award is a prize awarded to an innovative architect up to forty years old working in Estonia whose work has contributed to the promotion of Estonian architecture in the world. The prize has been awarded since 2008 by the Union of Estonian Architects in co-operation with Heldur Meerits and the travel agency Go Travel. The Young Architect Award gives the winner the chance to travel anywhere in the world, giving the opportunity to expand their vision and contribute back to the development of the country. At the time, the prize also included the publication of a monograph on the architect's work (Paulus 2008).

[15] This approach to the Aalto's work, which emphasises the inseparable intertwining of Aino and Alvar's creative output on the one hand, and their shared sympathy for Italy on the other, is underlined in a recent biography by the architects' grandson Heikki Aalto-Alanen, based on previously unpublished letters from the family archive (Aalto-Alanen 2023).

[16] Viimsi is a rural municipality neighbouring Tallinn. In the 1990s and 2000s Viimsi was the place where the newly rich gathered. As one of the wealthiest municipalities in Estonia, it is notorious for its car-centric identity (Drobot and Thakur 2022).

[17] Nuustaku is the historic name of the Southern Estonian town of Otepää.

[18] Mart Kalm (b. 1961) is an Estonian architectural historian, member of the Estonian Academy of Sciences and served as the rector of the Estonian Academy of Arts between 2015 and 2025. His 2001 monograph *Estonian 20th Century Architecture* is the most comprehensive insight into Estonian architecture to date, and has also served as a basis for the next generation of architectural scholars to come up with new interpretations. Kalm has been an acclaimed lecturer for decades, teaching 20th-century Estonian architectural history to architecture students at EKA, including tours of Estonia (Kalm 2001).

[19] Siiri Nõva (b. 1967) is an architect who focuses on historic buildings. Siiri Nõva grew up and still lives in the house designed by her grandmother Erika Nõva (1905-1987) in 1937. Erika Nõva was the first professional female architect in Estonia. In the 1930s she worked at the Settlement Office run by the Estonian Ministry of Agriculture which established new areas for settlement on land owned by the State. This led her to design hundreds of farmhouses – including her own house in Nõmme – that were inspired by traditional farm dwellings housing people on one side and livestock on the other (Parbus and Ruudi 2014).

[20] Erika Nõva grew up in a family of seven in the village of Muuksi. One of her brothers – August Volberg (1896-1982) – also became a highly respected architect (Hallas 1996).

[21] As a context, Estonia in the 1990s was characterised by rather fundamental debates about (national) identity, which inevitably had a cultural-political dimension. While conservatives felt that Estonians should forget the entire Soviet occupation and continue building the nation-state from where they left off before the war (an idealised vision of the golden age of the 1930s – national romanticism), at the other end of the political spectrum such myth-making was viewed ironically. The public debate was full of extreme views, but the truth is that the political, social, cultural and spatial interruption from the pre-war Republic of Estonia was so profound that people had

no idea or experience of it. The Soviets succeeded in transforming Estonian natural and built environment to such an extent that the few glimpses of life in the 1930s that Vallner describes here created then – and still create today – a jarring experience of time travel. Against this background, abstract debates about the evaluation of the past on the political left-right axis become secondary (Taul 2024).

[22] Raine Karp (b. 1939) studied construction at the Tallinn Polytechnic Institute (1957-1959) and architecture at Tallinn State Institute of Applied Art (1959-1964). He created some of the boldest examples of 1960s-1980s modernism in Estonia. As a distinguished architect Karp was able to travel widely. He visited Tokyo soon after the 1964 Olympics and was impressed with the solemn structures he experienced there (Karp and Väljas 2016).

[23] The Estonian Academy of Arts is characterised by a rather small number of full-time lecturers. Across the whole university, about 70% of teaching is done by short-term contract visiting lecturers and only 30% by full-time faculty members. This means that the vast majority of visiting lecturers are practising architects, designers and artists whose relationship with the university is limited to teaching and who do not usually have administrative or research responsibilities.

Bibliography

AALTO-ALANEN H. (2023) – *Aino + Alvar Aalto: A Life Together*. Phaidon, London.

ALVER A., KAASIK V. and TRUMMAL T. (1998) – *Over the buildings and beyond: urban projects & articles 1994–1998*. Alver, Kaasik, Trummal, Tallinn.

FEDOTOV D. (2024) – "The Case of Estonia: Educational Internationalization Strategy and Student Mobility". Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education, 16 (2).

FRASCARI M., HALE J. and STARKEY B. (ed. by) (2007) – *From Models to Drawings: Imagination and Representation in Architecture*. Routledge, New York.

DROBOT D. and THAKUR D. (2022) – *Life in suburbia - Viimsi: studio project 09.2021-05.2022*. Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn.

HERMANN E. (2013) "Scribbling as a vehicle for architectural ideas-in-the-making". Ehituskunst, pp. 6-25.

KALM M. (2001) – *Estonian 20th century architecture*. Prisma Prindi Kirjastus, Tallinn.

KARP R. and VÄLJAS M. (2016) – *Architect Raine Karp*. Estonian Museum of Architecture, Tallinn.

KOMENDANT A.E. (1975) – *18 years with architect Louis I. Kahn*. Aloray, Englewood (N.J.).

LIGE C.D. (2015) – "To Think In Actual Space, With Actual Materials: An Interview with Siiri Vallner of Kavakava Architects". ArchDaily 30December. Available at: <https://www.archdaily.com/779647/to-think-in-actual-space-with-actual-materials-an-interview-with-siiri-vallner-of-kavakava-architects> [last access 27 January 2025].

LIGE C.D. (ed. by) (2022) – *Miracles in Concrete. Structural Engineer August Komendant*. Birkhäuser and the Estonian Museum of Architecture, Basel and Tallinn.

PARBUS T. and RUUDI I. (2014) – "Emancipating architecture. Erika Nõva and the modernist architecture discourse from a gender-critical perspective". In: *Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia 2* (9), pp. 279-288.

PAULUS K. (ed. by) (2008) – *Siiri Vallner: young architect of the year 2008*. Union of Estonian Architects, Tallinn.

RUUDI I. (2020) – *Spaces of the Interregnum: Transformations in Estonian Architecture and Art 1986–1994*. Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn.

DOI: 10.12838/fam/issn2039-0491/n69-70-2024/1082

TAMMIS T. (2014) – "Breakthroughs in architecture education at the EAA in the 1990s". In: M. Kalm (ed. by) *From School of Arts and Crafts to Academy of Arts. 100 years of art education in Tallinn*. Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn.

TAUL G. (2016) – *The Estonian National Museum's main building at Raadi. An essay on spatial culture*. Estonian National Museum, Tartu.

TAUL G. (2024) – *Monumentality Trouble. Monumental-Decorative Art in Late Soviet Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*. Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn.

WOODFIELD S. (2009) – *Trends in International Student Mobility: A Comparison of National and Institutional Policy Responses in Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands*. Kingston University, London.

Merilin Tee is an interior architect based in Tallinn. She has worked as a project coordinator and lecturer at the Interior Architecture Department of the Estonian Academy of Arts. Merilin studied international business management at Tallinn University of Technology Business College (BA in 2001) and interior architecture and furniture design at the Estonian Academy of Arts (BA in interior architecture and furniture design, 2014; MA in interior architecture – "Vanishing Interior Architecture. Dwelling of Vello Asi", 2021; exchange studies at Hogeschool voor Wettenschap & Kunst, Sint-Lucas Architectuur Brussel-Gent in 2012; internship within the LLP/ERASMUS programme in Robbrecht en Daem architecten (BE), 2013). Previously she worked at the Permanent Representation of Estonia to the EU in Belgium (2004-2009; 2012) and at Robbrecht en Daem architecten (2013-2014).

Gregor Taul is a critic and curator based in Tallinn working as a lecturer in the Department of Interior Architecture at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Taul studied semiotics at Tartu University (BA in 2009) and art history in the Estonian Academy of Arts (MA in 2012; exchange studies in St Petersburg's Institute of Technology of Design in 2011). Taul was a PhD candidate in the Lisbon Consortium between 2016–2020 and defended his thesis in 2024 on late Soviet monumental-decorative art in the doctoral school of the Estonian Academy of Arts.
Since 2010 Taul has been active as a critic writing on visual art and architecture. In 2012 he co-authored a book on Estonian murals published by Lugemik. In 2016 Estonian National Museum published his book on the architecture of the museum's new building by DGT / Architects. He has been teaching in various secondary and higher education institutions in Estonia and presented conference papers across Europe.