

Repurposing the Past

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ABSTRACT

A target positioned in the space formerly occupied by the altar gave soldiers the opportunity to establish a shooting range in Paluküla Church, while the church's thick limestone walls created a secure depository for a gas company's storage rooms (or was it the other way around?).

After the Second World War, the pragmatic reuse of church buildings in Estonia, such as this one, brought these kinds of surprising change in function. The spatial environment of the church's surroundings itself bears information concerning various different strata of the location's history.

This visual essay presents a site-specific exhibition project that addressed this metamorphosis of space through the housing of new functions and an aim to find new methods for designers/architects in the repurposing process. The abandoned Paluküla Church on the small island of Hiiumaa in Estonia, used by military forces during the Soviet regime, became a laboratory – a test site – to experiment with a repurposing of the past through heightening spatial emotions to invoke different values.

The project, titled Housewarming took place from July to August in 2013 and created the momentary impression that there was life once again in the church. The exhibition was a chance for local community and others to experience, perceive and confront the transformation of the church while thinking about issues to do with repurposing buildings as a process that inevitably increases or decreases cultural values.



Above
Figure 1: Site-specific exhibition project Housewarming: spatial intervention the 'red bridge' as a wooden carpet, Paluküla Church, Hiiumaa island, Estonia, 2013. Photograph: ©Vaikla Studio.

SPATIAL CHANGE: PAST – PRESENT – FUTURE/ CONTEXT – ACTION – IDEAS

Academic Harrison Fraker defines Design Activism as:

... problem seeking: it is proactive, it chooses an issue (or set of issues) and explores it (or them) from a critical, sometimes ideological perspective. It uses design to recognize latent potential and make it visible. It explores “absences” in everyday life and gives them a “presence”. Design Activism reveals new ways of seeing the world and challenges existing paradigms.¹

In my research I analyse different possibilities for spatial intervention in the process of reusing buildings. Contemporary practices in the reuse process of old buildings are usually based on pure aesthetics and are shaped by market-driven concerns. In contrast, as an interior architect and artist, I am searching for alternative approaches that focus on the contemporary user of historical buildings with their specific values. My method is to incorporate knowledge of various disciplines in order to find new solutions at a transdisciplinary level. With the help of site-specific exhibition projects, thinking and working models, it is possible to create a laboratory – a test-site – to discover both existing values and, also, to test new ideas. It has become evident that a flexible and sensitive way of thinking leads to a solution that is able to interact with the lifestyle of the local community as well as the needs of users such as newcomers, tourists, etc.

I selected a sacral building/space as the subject of my research – Paluküla Church, on the small Western Estonian island of Hiiumaa – because it is a small and specific place, enabling the boundaries of the community to be more clearly perceived. It is also where my father was born and I have continued to visit since my childhood.



Above
Figures 2-3: Paluküla Church (1820), Hiiumaa island, Estonia / abandoned today.
Photograph: ©Vaikla Studio.

PAST/CONTEXT

This miniature neo-gothic church with lovely proportions was built in 1820 as Count Ungern-Sternberg's family sepulchral chapel. However, due to the high level of groundwater in the area, it appears no body has ever been buried there. The congregation of the nearby Kärkla Church used to hold its holiday services there. At the beginning of the Second World War, the church building was placed at the disposal of Russian military bases. Empty cartridge cases can still be found on the floor and indicate a target was set up in place of the altarpiece. Locals recall that for many years during the Soviet era (1940-1991) gas canisters were stored behind the church's thick limestone walls, as the local gas depot was located nearby. An industrial landscape evolved in the vicinity of the church and continues to operate – albeit only just – in the form of an auto repair shop, a woodworking shop, a plant nursery and other such facilities. The abandoned church building functioned as an international navigation mark for ships and continues to have this function today. For this reason, the church has a new roof and tower spire. The rest is in a state of neglect. Torn plastic sheeting covers the windows and flaps in the wind. Sometimes migratory swans fly in through the tower window to die.²

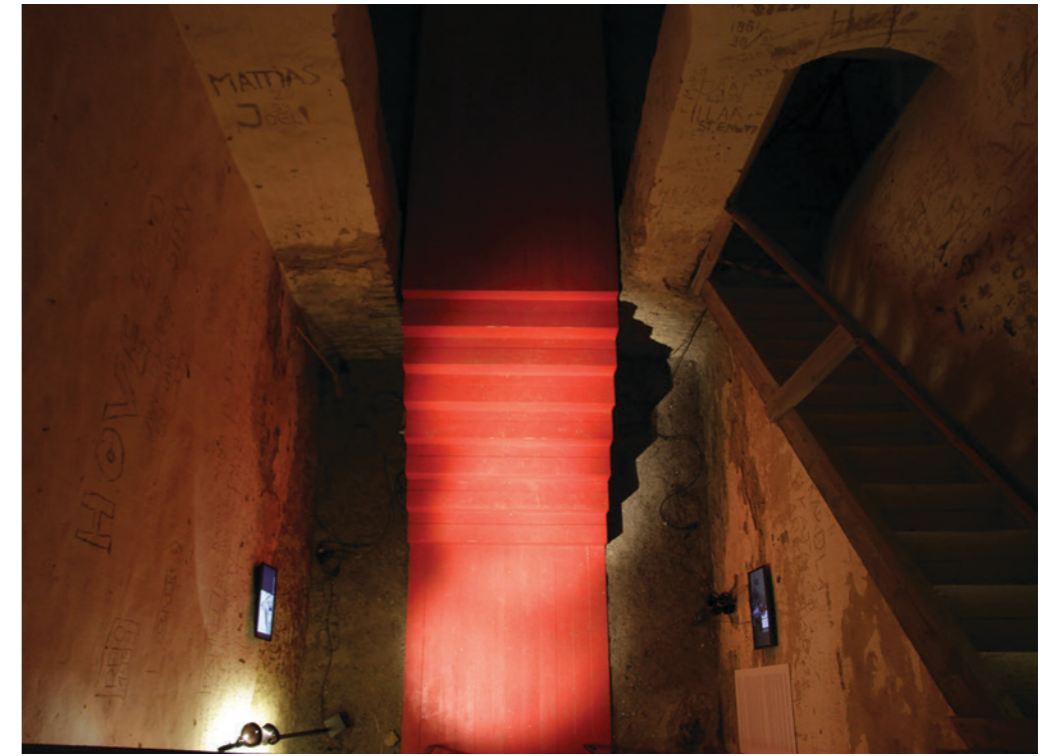
PRESENT/ACTION

To begin the project, I used the well-tryed method of interviewing, as people like to *talk* about architecture: about their own experiences, memories, expectations and dreams associated with a specific place, in this case an abandoned church building. The interviewees included officials who are indirectly connected to the church building.³ I asked them questions as to how they are connected to the building, how could it be used and, provocatively, whether the church building could be used as a nightclub or a home. To my surprise, I received relatively liberal responses. What was most important was that the church building could be used. A common response was that it could become a concert hall but respondents were also receptive to the idea of an athletics facility, as well as a home or a club. Personal contact with these people gave me the chance to recognise and analyse the attitude

of locals towards the re-purposing of the abandoned church building and encouraged me to implement the idea of spatial intervention through a site-specific exhibition project.

Churches had many pragmatic uses during the Soviet era such as stables, workshops, sports facilities and warehouses. The project – titled *Housewarming* – aimed to make this past present while also introducing for discussion and debate the current trend of transforming sacral buildings into luxurious hotels, boutiques, restaurants, nightclubs and private dwellings. A combination of light and sound installations, together with the activation of indoor and outdoor space, was used to communicate these pasts as an imaginary poetic vision. To do this I created a backdrop of sounds: a sea mark (wind and seabirds), a church (bells), a restaurant (forks and knives), a stable (animal voices), a nightclub (music), a sports hall (basketball), a workshop (hammer) and a home (children). These contrasting voices brought the empty abandoned space to life. In the night, the church was brought to life through using lighting to heighten emotion and a recording of nuns singing liturgical songs, composed in the twelfth century by Hildegard von Bingen.

Spatial interventions in the form of a wooden 'red bridge' (made with the help of local carpenters) provided the opportunity to move 'above' the dusty floor to a 'red altar' where visitors were invited to leave their personal thoughts and opinions on how to proceed with re-purposing the church. White curtains flying in the breeze invoked a sense of innocence and an illusion of a space full of life again.



Above
Figure 4-5: Site-specific exhibition project *Housewarming*: spatial intervention the 'red bridge' and information screens on the contemporary use of sacral buildings, Paluküla Church, 2013. Photograph: ©Vaikla Studio.



In parallel with *Housewarming*, I held a transdisciplinary workshop titled *Re-vitalization*⁴ to develop contemporary ways of thinking and reinterpreting the church building through thinking models and architectural models. Students from the Estonian Academy of Arts worked together with academics and local people to address these issues.

FUTURE/IDEAS

The students familiarised themselves with the context and worked in groups to develop different ideas. Over the course of four days and nights, we 'domesticised' the church for ourselves, using it as a laboratory for testing spatial possibilities including: a screening of the film *Paradies: Glaube* by Ulrich Seidl, an improvised zither concert, a performance of modern dance, a night church service and workshop presentations. All of these culminated in the opening of the *Housewarming* exhibition.

Opposite
 Figures 6-7: Site-specific exhibition project *Housewarming*: light and sound installation as a revitalization of space at night, Paluküla Church, 2013.
 Photograph: ©Vaikla Studio.

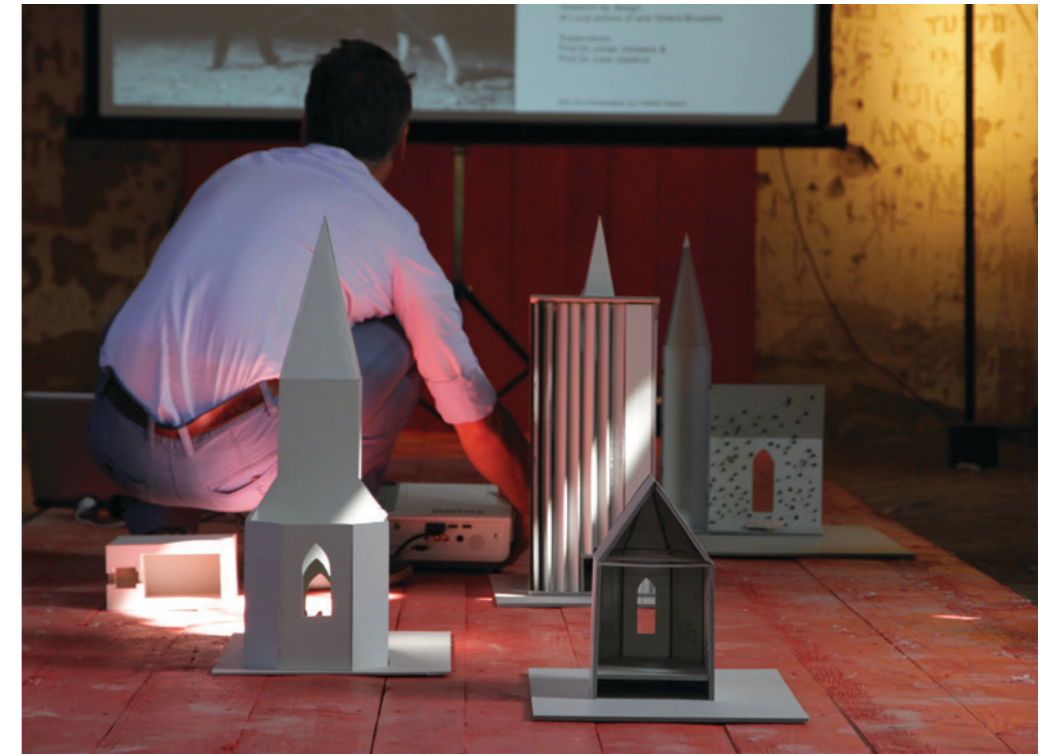
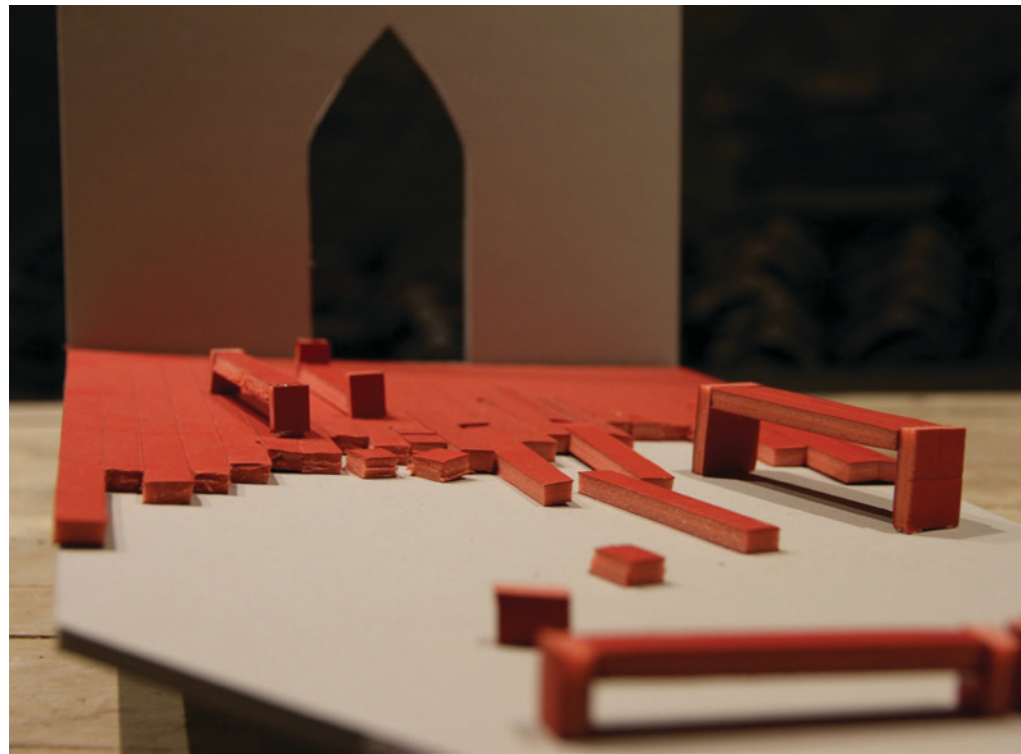


Opposite
 Figure 8: Trans-disciplinary OPEN workshop Re-vitalization:
 brainstorming, Paluküla Church, 2013.
 Photograph: ©Vaikla Studio.

Above top
 Figure 9: Trans-disciplinary OPEN workshop Re-vitalization:
 using the space as a lab (test-site).
 Photograph: ©Vaikla Studio.

Above bottom
 Figure 10: Trans-disciplinary OPEN workshop Re-vitalization:
 Performance by students of modern dance inspired by
 backdrop of sound, Paluküla Church, 2013.
 Photograph: ©Vaikla Studio.

An exhibition of the architectural models created by the students, which proposed new futures for the church, was displayed in the crypt. Young architects, interior architects, designers and art historians were invited to make proposals. One proposition: the content of the church was to remain the same but the building was to be given a new form. In effect, the church was 'hidden in a box' as a strategy to attract more attention to it. In another case, the building was turned into a stopover providing lodgings for backpackers, and multifunctional furniture was designed for different kinds of use. In a third case, the space was activated by a mountain-climbing wall. Another group proposed a place where gay and lesbian couples could be married. During the repurposing process the question of spirituality in terms of what is sacred to people today and in the future was continually posed.



Opposite and Above
 Figures 11-13: Trans-disciplinary OPEN workshop Re-vitalization: reinterpreting the church building in the form of thinking and working architectural models.
 Photograph: ©Vaikla Studio.

The exhibition project fulfilled its function by activating both the space and people, and enabled people to notice what already exists. During the project, hundreds of people (both locals and tourists) visited the church and filled hundreds of slips of paper with written personal suggestions that were then nailed to the 'red altar'. The project was reviewed and critiqued in local as well as cultural and architectural media, and the local community nominated *Housewarming* as one of the most popular events of 2013 in Hiiumaa.

CONCLUSION

While the construction of new buildings transforms our surroundings, the function of historical buildings is also changed. Greater or lesser potential emerges for these buildings depending on their typology. Depending on context, some grandiose buildings fade into decay, are left vacant or have minimal function. Some are left in a state of 'suspended animation'. Whether in the city or countryside, it seems inevitable that empty abandoned buildings attract violent interferences. In contrast, through my practice I pose the question: What forms can proactive spatial interventions take to create a positive connection with the surrounding environment (past and present) and communicate in a meaningful way with the local community with a view to future possibilities?

As an interior architect I feel an interest in and responsibility for addressing this question. Instead of producing aesthetically reconstructed buildings, I believe it is critical to create 'alive' spaces where intangible and architectural values meet and can be encountered. Historical buildings act as memory containers for local users. With the help of creativity and 'design activism' I am looking for edges where the liberal viewpoints of the contemporary world can meet the context of unique traditions; spaces where contradictions are possible and frictions are allowed. I engage local communities in this process of revitalising space in order to discover the values of the building as it is and test the limits of new ideas. These events – site-specific exhibitions, workshops and spatial interventions – create a dialogue between the lost traditions of the past, and invite new traditions to be created through the transformation and translation of the potential of a building into the language of contemporary users.

My spatial interventions can be provocative and raise several uncomfortable questions as part of a process of involving grassroots initiatives to develop design proposals to meet the needs of different communities. The activation of space and bringing an environment to life through contemporary methods relies on a transdisciplinary approach, professional knowledge and skills, yet also on a sensitive approach to preserve what already exists, both material and immaterial, in repurposing the past for the future.

NOTES

1. H. Fraker, "Welcome to DA," *Frameworks*. 1 (Spring) 2005, California, College of Environmental Design Berkeley, 3.
2. Karin Kokla, a local resident interviewed by the author, Paluküla Church, June 26, 2013.
3. Officials included the senior inspector for Hiiumaa of the National Heritage Board, the chairman of the board of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church Kärdla congregation, the pastor for Hiiumaa and the rural municipality mayor. Residents of the town of Kärdla were also interviewed and included a schoolteacher, a doctor, the master carpenter of the Paluküla woodworking shop and several of my relatives (from a schoolgirl to linguist).
4. The workshop was held in collaboration with the Estonian Academy of Arts (EAA). Students worked with supervisors Tüüne-Kristin Vaikla/EAA; Tom Callebaut/LUCA, Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, Brussels/Ghent; Ranulph Glanville/UCL, London; together with EAA academics: Martin Melioranski, Andres Ojari, Urmo Vaikla, Maris Mändel, Oliver Orro.