

No Geography

Stepping into the untouched time of Soviet industrial heritage in rural Estonia

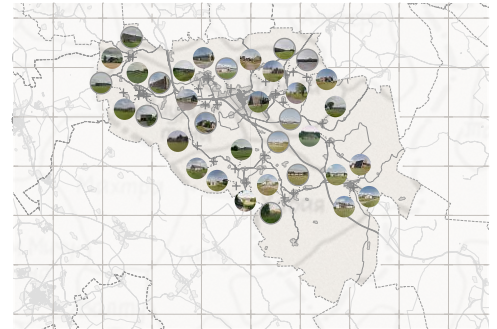
project description • spring semester 2021 • Bergen School of Architecture
Anna Liisa Saavaste, June 2021

where (site+context)

Scattered around the Estonian countryside stand crumbling remnants of a bygone era. Grain dryers, storehouses, weighhouses, barns in various arrangements of wood, concrete elements, asbestos sheet. These buildings, once the nodes of a country-wide network of collective agricultural production from the 1950s to 1990s, can be found in various stages of decay. In their obsolescence they've taken on entirely new characteristics.

what/why

While choosing to map all Soviet agricultural buildings in the Kose parish of Northern Estonia, it quickly became clear that points of interest had to be narrowed down even further. Four sites were chosen for research. The structures are hazardous, often in a functional and legal limbo, yet offer metaphysical contemplations like no other. Being left outside of time for decades has gifted them an almost spiritual quality. Following contemporary architectural discourse in Estonia, nearly no mentions can be found of these striking buildings, although they are as synonymous with the rural as fields and forests, and endlessly fascinating. Out of this exploration, one building complex emerged as a particularly interesting case study - the former Oruvälja dairy.



how

The twin volumes of barns attached to feed storage facilities make for an unnerving and beautiful visit. Years worth of unofficial activities have unfolded in the complex, functions finding their forms. A ruin, seemingly devoid of life, upon a closer look has been serving as waste disposal ground, rave hall, shooting range, a location for a quaint living room-like gathering spot...

A few spaces have been left to their own devices. Some out of consideration for the caved in floors and ceilings, but others, seemingly, out of reverence for place. Devoid of graffiti or traces of festivities, these vast spaces quiet the visitor, like a shrine or a temple would. Most notably, one of the barns presented itself as a place to contemplate. A wish emerged to accentuate the qualities present, honouring the established balance of the complex.

A ruin, devoid of life, upon a closer look has been serving as waste disposal ground, rave hall, shooting range, a location for a quaint living room-like gathering spot...



Much of Soviet architecture was composed of panels and modules. To find a form, which would further enhance the otherworldly temple-likeness of the chosen space, panels were removed and rearranged, opening the structure up to the elements.

A play on the most striking feature of the building - its unusual length - was made by removing a strip of the roof and filling up a long and narrow pool of water underneath. A meditation spot invites the visitor to dwell at the very end of the pool, observing the sober rhythm of columns gradually disappearing into light.

More of the roof plates are then removed and stacked to form three monumental towers at the further end of the barn, to invite a current inhabitant

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of the complex - the communally nesting barn swallow - to extend the colony. As mosquito larvae beings to hatch in the pool and more vegetation begins to take over the newly exposed and light-filled space, conditions for bird habitation improve further.

The aim of the intervention is to merely align the space with what is already nascent. Be it a feeling of stillness and reverence or the gradual transfer of ownership from cultivation to wilderness.



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Diploma program • June 2021
 Anna Liisa Saavaste
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No Geography
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tutors

Cristian Stefanescu (APP)
Marco Casagrande (DAV)
Alberto Altes Arlandis (1:1)
Kim Christensen (TTA)
Nancy Couling (sensor)
André Fontes (sensor)
Frode Fadnes Jacobsen (social science)
Pavlina Lucas (writing)
Arild Wåge (sensor)

Diploma program
Bergen School of Architecture 2020

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preface

The unheard sound of Manhattan

"I wish I could remember the name of this artist. Some artist attached some microphones to his windowpane in Manhattan and recorded, I think, a week or two weeks of sound.

And then he sped it up, I don't know, a hundred times. So, you're hearing a week of Manhattan noise at a hundred times of the speed. As expected, the cars' honking sounded like insects chirping, that's not a surprise.

The really weird thing is that there's this strange droning sound in the background.

It turns out - you know what it was?

It was the standing pressure wave over the Atlantic Ocean, that changes its tone so gradually that we never notice it."

A story told a couple years ago by the philosopher Graham Harman at the 2019 Tallinn Architecture Biennale keynote lecture has stayed with me since.

The idea of something being very real, yet imperceptible became fascinating - and a point of departure for the diploma investigations.

There are many reasons why a reality might go unnoticed. A basic lack of knowledge of it. The entity might be of little relevance to a particular observer. A phenomenon might move along different tracks, layers or timescales in relation to the ones inhabited by a viewer.

The task became about finding a part of the built environment equivalent to the imperceptible sound of the standing pressure wave.

What is there and yet, isn't?

The answer surfaced from memories of childhood road trips.

When travelling across rural Estonia, not much stands out to overwhelm the senses. The succession of views are better described as meditative. An exceedingly flat landscape alternates between field and forest, save for an occasional borough.

Yet, scattered around are ubiquitous ghostly structures, planted more often than not in the middle of any field.

Numerous, silent and never a destination, they are easy to dismiss as they blend into the rhythm of what rushes past. Reasons for an entire category of buildings to fall into relative invisibility could be straightforward, but what might be hidden in their obsolescence?



Any roadside view from a car window, driving in rural Estonia.

Cluster of agricultural production buildings from the 1970s and 80s.
Kose parish, Ardu borough.

agriculture

/ˈagrɪkʌltʃə/

the science or practice of farming, including cultivation of the soil for the growing of crops and the rearing of animals to provide food, wool, and other products

asbestos

/əzˈbestɒs/

a highly heat-resistant fibrous silicate mineral that can be woven into fabrics, and is used in brake linings and in fire-resistant and insulating materials

brigadier

/brɪɡəˈdɪə/

a manager of a Soviet collective farm

dairy

/ˈdeɪəri/

a building or room for the processing, storage, and distribution of milk and milk products

geography

/dʒɪˈɒɡrəfi, ˈdʒɒɡrəfi/

the study of the physical features of the earth and its atmosphere, and of human activity as it affects and is affected by these, including the distribution of populations and resources and political and economic activities

glossary

kolkhoz

/kɒlˈkɒz/

a cooperative agricultural enterprise operated on state-owned land by peasants from a number of households who belonged to the collective and who were paid as salaried employees on the basis of quality and quantity of labour contributed

rookery

/ˈrʊk(ə)ri/

a colony of breeding animals, generally birds; man's activity as it affects and is affected by these, including the distribution of populations and resources and political and economic activities

Soviet Union

/ˈsəʊvɪət ˈjuːnjən/

former northern Eurasian empire (1917/22–1991) stretching from the Baltic and Black seas to the Pacific Ocean and, in its final years, consisting of 15 Soviet Socialist Republics (S.S.R.'s)

sovkhoz

/ˈsɒv kɒz/

state-operated agricultural estate in the U.S.S.R. organized according to industrial principles for specialized large-scale production. Workers were paid wages but might also cultivate personal garden plots. Its form developed from the few private estates taken over in their entirety by the state in the original Soviet expropriations



concept model

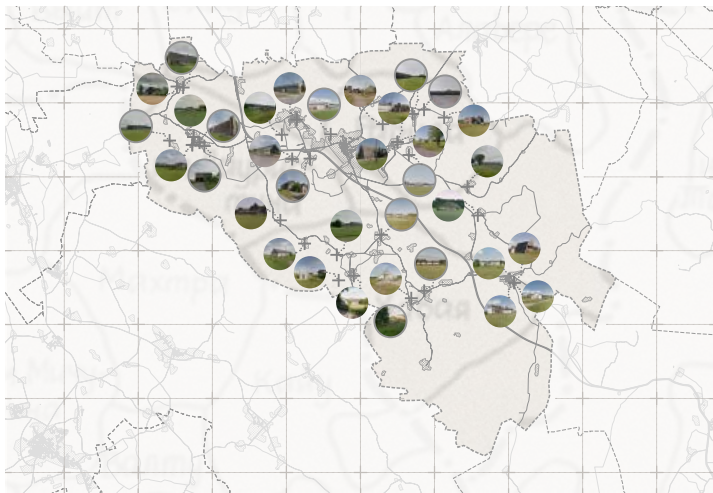
*Representation of a flexible system in movement.
(rubber bands, cotton string, Claudiu, Dan Paul, Lin, Linda, Mats)*

The model illustrates the idea of a flexible system able to satisfy the unpredictable movements of several independent actors.

The system is in constant change and under a considerable amount of stress.

The system depends on tension provided by the pull of different actors. If even one actor lets go, the functioning of the system is compromised. Any movement activates all parts of the system.

Depending on the movements of actors, system can become increasingly entangled.



project description

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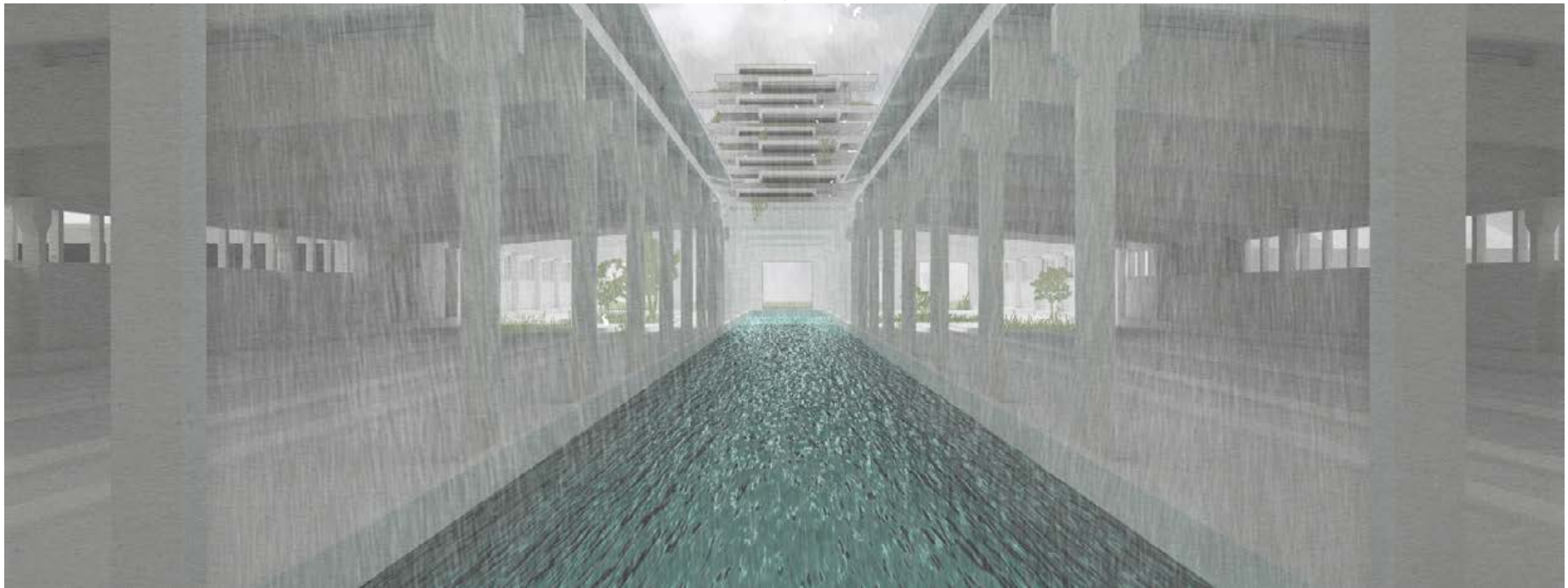
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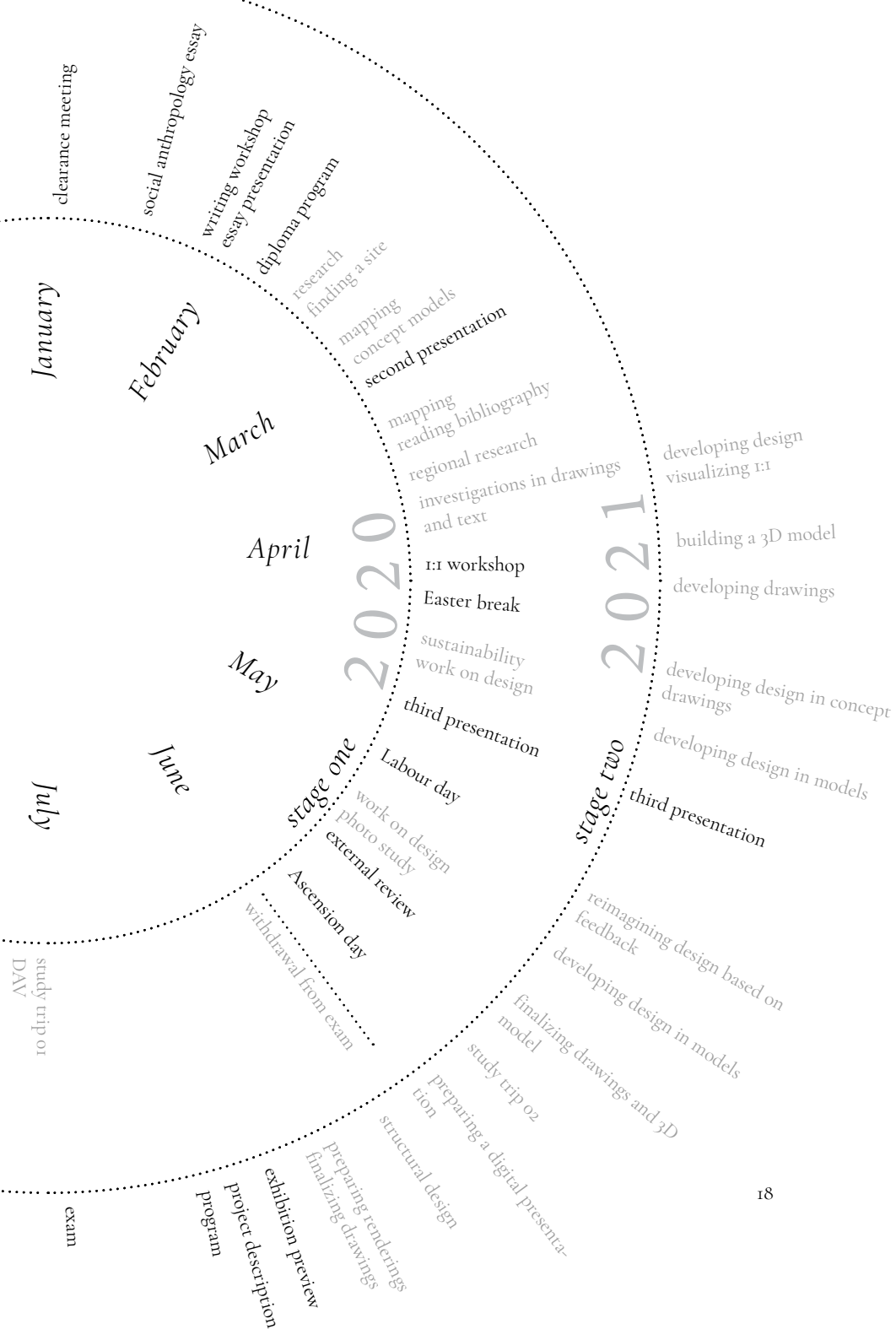
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diploma timeline

The project started as a theoretical investigation into the concept of **resilience** at the beginning of the spring semester 2020. Under the subtitle “Methods of navigating suspense” it searched for a way to re-imagine the relationship between the human and natural environment.

By mid-February a topically relevant field of interest had emerged - agricultural production network of Soviet Estonia. Research was now divided between theory of resilience and history of chosen sites.

As departure for a study trip came closer, countries closed borders as a safety measure to combat the Covid-19 pandemic.

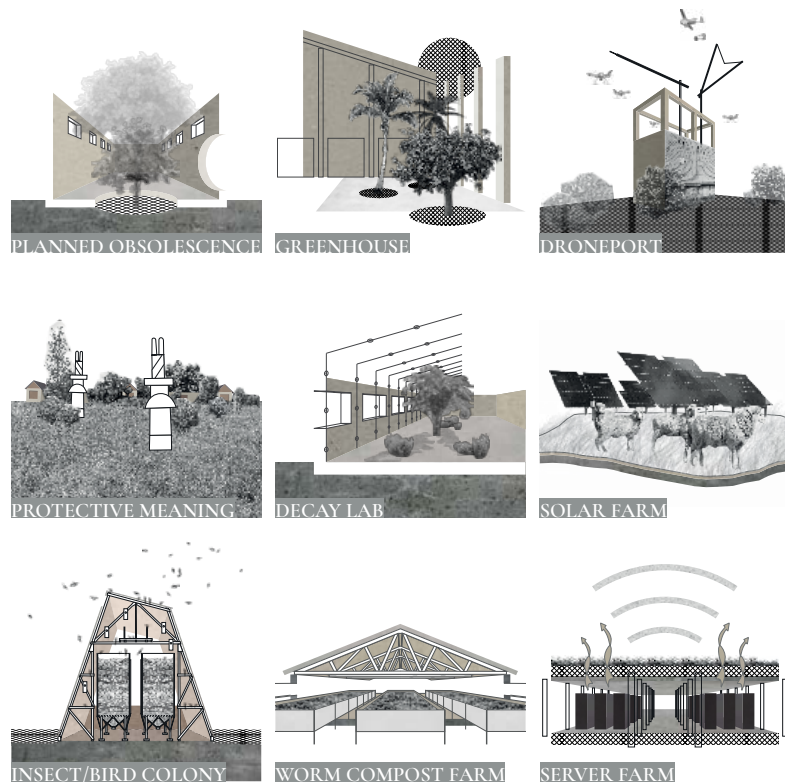
Work continued under lockdown conditions in Bergen, Norway. I took the chance to perform remote research and, trying to make the best out of distance, the project was steered towards becoming a science fiction-inspired speculative menu of interventions. A playful masterplan of a kind. Lets call this part of the process **stage one**.

Unfortunately, further challenges related to the pandemic made it necessary to postpone diploma work until 2021.

Site visits in the latter half of 2020 and 2021 revealed important characteristics of the site, which started to reimagine the project. It became necessary to reconcile theory and practice with a new title of “No Geography”.

Parts from the preceding theoretical research remained relevant, others less so. The project changed shape freely and to a great extent, drawing from encounters with locals, artistic and structural experimentations. This, more

intimate connection to the subject made up a **stage two** of the process, and produced entirely different results. This reassessed approach leads to the final outcome of the project.



stage one

From January to June 2020, the diploma process was led by the imagining of resilience in the face of approaching environmental changes and the accompanying ripple effects. My interest was seeing resilience as dynamic and responsive, in contrast to a desire for blissful stability and certainty, which might become increasingly unattainable due to future climate-related calamities.

Systems with many nodes - such as the former agricultural production network in Estonia - became a way to ground this idea.

Since the work had to be done remotely, I was advised to approach these explorations playfully, as if setting up a science fiction scenario. More a commentary or a provocation, encouraged to come up with far-fetched proposals.

The buildings were, to a student looking at them on Google Street View from another country, an uninviting sight, but not necessarily in an unproductive way. The central idea of stage one was a focus on non-human actors. A person might never want to inhabit these buildings again, but a bird might. The far-off-ness of the grain dryers and barns might have made them obsolete for decades, but will do perfectly well for technological actors of the near future - server farms, autonomous drones, the like.

Having made some progress developing these ideas, I realized that having had no personal connection to the sites, the work was lacking. 2020 was a year of many unexpected challenges and the diploma process had to be postponed until 2021.



stage two

The second half of 2020 brought some moments of lifted lockdown regulations, which allowed for an extended stay at the, by then, chosen site - the Oruvälja dairy at Oru village. The days were spent rummaging around the quite extensive site, allowing it to overwhelm, and shadowing the locals.

At the end of the stay it was clear that the building complex formerly considered 'uninviting' had invited a great deal of visitors over the years, who had left behind objects, traces of various activities, even whole transformed rooms. Most parts of the complex evidently had their own particular use. But there was a space that still had a kind of a perplexed spirit about it, like something recently abandoned.

Time away from site was spent going along with the flow. Picking up a local lady from her food shopping trip to the capital, to be invited to harvest pears in her homestead and hearing her memories from the Soviet period. Having a chance to see the parish accordion band. Alongside the local pastor, embarking on a silent hike during the night, along the small roads surrounded by a dark forest.

In the end, hopefully the site was allowed to do most of the talking. A set of meditation practices are being cultivated in the village (following the initiative of our friend the pastor). Along with the already contemplative nature of one of the barns of the former dairy, it became natural to let it grow into a kind of a temple.

Some of the ideas from stage one felt at home here and became bird habitat towers. Having cut into the lull of the building, perhaps it would invite further participation from the buildings visitors.

selected bibliography

“R-URBAN or how to co-produce a resilient city.”
by Constantin Petcou & Doina Petrescu.

“The Optimist’s Telescope: Thinking Ahead in a Reckless Age”
by Bina Venkataraman

“We Have Never Been Modern”
by Bruno Latour

“Layered Landscapes Lofoten”
by Magdalena Haggärde & Gisle Løkken

“Ecology and Flexibility in Urban Civilization”
in Steps to an Ecology of Mind by Gregory Bateson

“The Three Ecologies”
by Félix Guattari

“A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia”
by Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari

“Nomads of South Persia”
by Fredrik Barth

“Looking across three generations of Alaska Natives to explore how culture
fosters indigenous resilience”
by Lisa Wexler

“Chapter 8: Wilma Derksen”
in David and Goliath by Malcolm Gladwell

CV

Anna Liisa Saavaste
31/07/94

education

Bergen School of Architecture	2017-
The Oslo School of Architecture and Design,	sept-dec 2017
Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism	
Estonian Academy of Arts,	2013-2016
Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning	

work

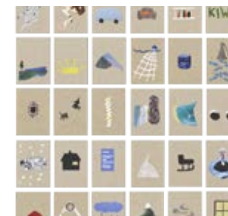
70°N arkitektur	jun 2017-dec 2018
	nov-dec 2019
Venice Architecture Biennale,	may-sept 2016
Baltic Pavilion	
The Opinion Festival (Paide),	apr-aug 2015
Spatial planning team	
Estonian Printing Museum	2012-2013

workshops/competitions

aug 2019	"Steampunk" pavilion building workshop, TAB Tallinn, Estonia
aug 2018	"FLOODED" summer school Soomaa, Estonia
jul-aug 2015	"Press Play" workshop, EASA Valletta, Malta
sept 2014	"Different public space" student competition, 1st prize Tallinn, Estonia
jul-aug 2014	"Imaginarium" workshop, EASA Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria
may 2014	Bergen International Wood Festival Bergen, Norway

articles

aug 2016	About self-reliance regarding the Venice Architecture Biennale Sirp, 19. VIII 2016
jul 2016	Venice Architecture Biennale encourages to achieve the impossible Sirp, 18. VII 2016
jun 2016	The Baltic Pavilion. A vision crossing the borders of nation states at Venice Architecture Biennale. Sirp, 3. VI 2016
sept 2014	How we made something out of nothing for the first time Sirp, 18. IX 2014



Layered Landscapes Lofoten
BAS 2017 spring

Tutors: Magdalena Hag-
gärde, Gisle Løkken, Tone
Megrønn Berge



Body & Space Morphologies
AHO 2017 fall

Tutors: Rolf Gerstlauer,
Julie Dind, Sol Nesvik



Infrastructure Space
BAS 2019 spring

Tutors: Christof Mayer,
Tom Chamberlain

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