

HOMES FOR ESTONIA

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Every typical space is brought about by typical societal relations. Spatial images are the dreams of society.

— Sigfried Kracauer, *On Employment Offices: Construction of a Space*,
Frankfurter Zeitung, 17 June 1930

If societal relations bring about typical spaces, like Sigfried Kracauer has written, then urban sprawl, new residential areas close to the city, is undoubtedly a type of space typical of the 21st century Estonian society. Their examination, in turn, could reveal a few things about the society as well as the socio-cultural context creating these spaces.

In his photo series *In Vicinity* Paul Kuimet finds his starting-point in the constructed environment as an immediate expression of human ambitions. By observing the landscape he tries to map the development of the Estonian society over the last two decades.

Photographs taken in new residential areas of Peetri, Rae and Järveküla near Tallinn document the changes in ideology, ownership relations, housing construction and way of life that have occurred since Estonia regained independence in 1991. These changes brought modernist mass utopia from pre-fabricated apartment houses to the enclaves of private houses near the city. Kuimet is interested in these residential areas that were established during impetuous real estate development on former kolkhoz fields in the outskirts of Tallinn. It is a nondescript zone, where the urban principles have spread outwards and turned rural areas into a city.¹ How to describe that new type of landscape that has emerged during the last two decades and altered entire territories, but is still so difficult to capture?

Mass-produced living spaces in suburbia, the districts of serially constructed and affordable small houses established in the neighbourhoods of cities, have been an object of interest for artists and photographers at least since Ed Ruscha's photo books like *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and *Parking Lots* (1967), as well as Dan Graham's *Homes for America* project (1966) for *Arts Magazine*. Indeed, Kuimet has borrowed his photo technique from the movement of New Topographics in the 1970s American photography (let us mention Stephen Shore's series *Uncommon Places* (1973–1978)

as an example), which sought to visualise man-altered landscapes.² Artists like Graham concentrated on the analysis of Fordist production principles and techniques that were transferred into living space, where they impeccably synchronised with the aesthetic preferences of the era. At the same time, suburbs with their lack of individualism and usually only a loose connection to the surrounding environment were of interest from a sociological and cultural perspective as well, raising questions about the role of architecture in the society and everyday culture, as well as the connections between ideology and the organising principles of architecture. Kuimet too seems to be less interested in the aspects of serial production and housing types than the altered landscape which reflects changes in culture and lifestyle as well as ideologies behind these.

Photographs by Kuimet, but most importantly his interest in people's everyday living environment, could be indirectly associated with a group of Tallinn architects and artists in the 1970s who turned toward the (post-) industrial landscape and the trivial environment as a consequence of man's construction activity (the Tallinn slum, for instance).

At home in only five minutes from the city border!

The birth of suburbs is associated with the redefinition of the way of life and lifestyle in post-war America and Western Europe, the ideas Estonia adopted in the 1990s after regaining independence. This model of life, based on the traditional idea of a nuclear family³ and made possible thanks to technology (cars as means of transportation and television (and these days, of course, the Internet) as a source of information), became from one possible way of living a self-evident 'normality'.

Cars and the Internet have influenced our perception of space. Driving home by car, our surrounding environment becomes an impersonal area between home and work that is only experienced through the windshield of the car. It is something we prefer to pass

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through quickly. Houses equipped with cables allow us to virtually participate in public life, to mingle with various (imaginary) communities and even escape from the miserable spatial reality altogether. It is not the space itself, but a fast and easy connection (to the city) that makes suburban life tolerable.

And yet, what is it that makes suburbs so attractive to so many? The success of this way of life, it seems, is less dependent on economic and ecological considerations than a specific image of suburbs that has been designed. Suburbs promise to protect us from the threatening and hostile mass society and collectiveness ('hijacking' the former kolkhoz fields seems almost a symbolic act). They not only promise to bring back the human dimension that is lost in metropolises, but also to recover individualism, thus confronting the alienating anonymity of the city and creating an illusion of safety.⁴ At the same time, small suburban houses carry another specific meaning in Estonia. House ownership in a suburb not only means escaping from Soviet-style districts of pre-fabricated apartment houses, but also getting away from the 'typical' Russian neighbours in these areas. Pre-fabricated houses were built in the West too, but in the collective consciousness of Estonians they are associated with the Soviet power and migrants. Single family homes in suburban areas, on the other hand, embody privatisation, middle class, conservative ideology and a return to the ideal of nuclear family – values undermined by (Soviet) mass construction and its concepts of living. They also stand for segregation as well as social and national⁵ homogeneity (if not hygiene), which opposes itself to the heterogeneity of the city.⁶ Typical suburban residents are young and successful Estonian families, thus excluding the marginal social groups and diversity.

Therefore, suburbs can be seen as a territorial equivalent to aggressive policies for population increase and privatisation that were brought about by economic growth and the very same Fordist production model. According to the common idea, single-family homes in

suburbs are more associated with the reconstruction of traditions and continuity than the logic of real estate market and strategies of neo-liberal urban planning, pointing out another important change, namely, the replacement of communication with representation. It is not the constructed reality (which would structure relationships and communication) what is important, but the image clients would be willing and able to identify with, a fantasy that creates wishes and desires (fulfilled by a previously compiled catalogue of product samples). However, what these images of 'home village' and house in a suburb hide is the fact that the ghettofication and disorder of city life as well as the anonymous mass society, the phenomena suburban life tries to confront, have already expanded into the countryside a long time ago. The principles of industrialised production and modernist city, such as functionalism, standardised uniformity and rational organisation of space, invade these areas through the standard planning of catalogue houses. Although the façades seem to manifest uniqueness, the garages, parabolic antennas attached to the houses and communications constitute a homogeneous infrastructure.

At the same time, new residential areas have eliminated any public space (of communication). Michel Foucault has analysed its disappearance as one of the techniques of the modern disciplinary power.⁷ Suburbs that are regulated by hidden tools of social control⁸ are associated with a new 'discursive space', the fundamentally changed relationship between the public and private. With their houses built straight on the field, separated from one another with hedges and fences and equipped with driveways (there are no pavements there, because people hardly ever go on foot), suburbia reflects, anchors and reproduces the radical reorganisation of social 'public' sphere.

Exposing this space seems to be the purpose of Kuimet's photographs. This, however, should not be understood as searching for 'significance', or for a metaphysical experience. Kuimet is not so much interested

in subjective and irrational traits that appear unexpectedly in habitual everyday reality and were still present in the Tallinn slum, than in the typicality and structure of space, which serves as a basis for political interpretation. At the same time, he does not attach importance to the mocking confrontation of an image with reality, the idealised fantasy of 'home village' with a miserable landscape without (infra)structure, nor does he care for the disdain for ugly suburban areas and their dystopian nature. In his series that takes off from the recognition of – or perhaps even the opposition to – the economic system with the changes it has caused in the ways of life and especially in space, Kuimet primarily seeks to map the latter. Places he has photographed are not associated with serious tragedies or (personal) liberating moments of authenticity in a seemingly randomly designed suburban reality. What we see is the attentive documentation of the traces of man's everyday interventions in landscape – the physiognomy of suburbia.

Physiognomy of suburbia

Photographers of New Topographics argued that the structure of an image tells several things about the society, its organisation and taste. Organising the picture space will create a sense of space and articulate it. On his photographs that are mostly establishing shots, Kuimet has focused on private houses or house groups. Although they are not staged, his photographs are still very precisely constructed and taken from carefully selected perspectives. Various horizontal and vertical lines organising the picture space (house walls, railings and fences, driveways, lantern posts) and their corresponding diagonals (gable roofs, high-voltage lines) are in contrast with the mounds of sand and piles of construction material on the foreground, as well as plants invading the picture space from left or right. Opulent grass by the road, the typical suburban vegetation that serves as a sign of natural environment, is in contrast to the carefully trimmed lawn patches in the yards. Frames that cut the depicted

objects off from their surrounding landscape further increase the sense of isolation.

Kuimet never steps too close to his objects. On the one hand, he seems to keep away out of respect for privacy, on the other, he has no wish to even peek behind the façades of houses, as these could reveal personality. Personal choices and individuality are reflected in the architectural forms of the houses and car brands parked in front of them.

It is only the expressive light that seems to stand in opposition to the laconic nature and rational structure of his photographs – and to their objects. Almost half of the photographs were taken at nighttime. Streetlights serve as spotlights to illuminate certain points in space, leaving the rest in the shadow. A handful of illuminated houses are glowing on plain fields in the darkness like alien spaceships that have temporarily landed there. Bright streetlights at nighttime should instill safety, yet there is something uneasy, almost threatening about them, as if the light itself would set the stage for a crime to be committed.⁹

The central structural element in these landscapes is the highway that occasionally cuts into the frame, though, most of the time it is what Kuimet has positioned his camera on. However, these are not some random views from the window of a passing car. With the perspective of his photographs Kuimet places the viewer in the position of a knowing eye-witness.¹⁰ But what is the crime s/he has witnessed?

What reveals itself in Kuimet's images is the alienation and illusoriness of 'normality' created by rejecting the political and social reality – the dystopian nature of suburbia. Instead of the symbiosis of idyllic nature with the contemporary life in 'modern homes' seen in interior design magazines, his photographs deal with the disintegration of the environment. They expose things that 'should have remained hidden'.¹¹ Places featured on the photographs taken by Kuimet do not reflect a secure and cosy suburban universe. Rather, they depict non-sites without specificity, without location or idiosyncratic

surroundings. Such non-sites correspond to the principle of rational zoning, creating anonymous spaces defined by their function and purpose. Nostalgic village iconography collides here with commercialised yearning for 'one's own home'. As if to further underline anonymity, the photographs are left untitled. These places could exist anywhere, even right here in our own neighbourhood.

Monuments of our time

Most of the photographs in the series were taken at the time when the economic boom was replaced by an equally vertiginous downturn and depression that left behind several desolate construction sites, grassy plots and houses that had fallen into ruins. In many cases it is unclear whether the buildings are still under construction or whether they have already become ruins; whether they are still waiting for residents or whether they are already abandoned. In this respect, we are dealing here with a phenomenon the American artist Robert Smithson has called 'ruins in reverse'. Smithson treated urban sprawl, the infinitely monotonous residential areas as part of the entropy of architecture. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built, but rather rise into ruin before they are finished.¹² Suburbs exist without a past; they stand for a future that is already abandoned. Instead of causing us to remember the past, these new monuments cause us to forget the future.¹³ Smithson writes about Passaic, but the same applies to Tiskre and Peetri: they have taken over the role of Rome as 'The Eternal City'.¹⁴ Ruins will reveal the inside of this environment. Suburbs themselves will become a failed vision of the future – the way it happened earlier to the idea of modernist utopia discarded in suburbs, opening it up for a critical gaze.

Ruins themselves serve as the topos of photography. Photography was invented at the time when the world went through a fundamental change and photographers were given a task of perpetuating what was about to disappear. Kuimet's series too includes photographs

where the new and old have come into conflict, because the old has not yet fully disappeared (for instance, a distant view on a new residential area, with hay rolls on the foreground).

There is another important reason not yet mentioned why Kuimet has turned to this landscape. There is an autobiographical motive behind these photographs: the author himself grew up in a neighbourhood that was overrun by urban sprawl. Thus, the series is both political and emotional; objectivity is intertwined with melancholy that has to do with the fact that the familiar landscape has transformed beyond recognition. Loss is closely connected to photography, but it is also a subject of melancholy. According to Freud, a melancholic is aware of his loss, without knowing exactly what s/he has lost. This also seems to be the reason behind Kuimet's revisit to his childhood landscapes. Unlike Freud, Walter Benjamin views melancholy as philosophical attitude rather than psychological disorder, believing that the idea of melancholy expresses the struggle for presentation.¹⁵

In the eyes of a melancholic the world will turn into an image. At the same time s/he is conscious of the fact that it is merely an image. Likewise, small dream houses in new residential areas near Tallinn exist as images in magazines, commercial booklets and TV shows. They conceal space behind that image and hide the stratification of a suburb as well as the commodification of 'one's own house' with its uniqueness limited to the presented product range. The commercial logic permeating the environment is more striking and unbeautiful in new residential districts than anywhere else. We can sense the emptiness of the world here, as well as the way everything will turn into commodity and become replaceable as such, which, again, will become a reason for melancholy.¹⁶ On the photographs taken by Kuimet, the blank (desolate) signifiers of the economy of desire that are piled up by the road also denote the randomness of dwelling constructions. If the purpose of photography is to store the disappearing world and make

distant places accessible, photographs taken by Kuimet seek to uncover that space behind images, to make us perceive the unhomeliness of the colonised landscape and deconstruct the 'official' reality. Although Kuimet mainly focuses on spatial relations, his interest in socio-economical relations manifests in various details. It is still a social and not only aesthetic space he is interested in. Even though the optimism with which Benjamin welcomed the arrival of photography as a medium that has a potential of reorganising social relations (indeed, industrialisation of photography had made picture-taking accessible to the masses) has cooled down a long time ago, we still should not discard that potential altogether. Victor Burgin has described a photograph (insofar as the structure of representation reproduces ideology and photographs themselves construct subjects) as a 'place of work', a structured and structuring space which offers us a chance to make critical comments and adjust the existing images.¹⁷

In Vicinity presents a personal and at the same time collective experience of the Estonian landscape, documenting trivial and unimportant views. Unlike the architects and artists of the 1970s who approached the (industrial) environment and the various consequences of man's construction activity, Kuimet is not interested in redefining the environment or bringing out its singularity, nor does he seek aesthetic pleasure in strangeness and tastelessness, in the *genius loci*. (In the suburbs one cannot even stroll around like a flâneur: there are no streets and the standardised environment does not tolerate 'random encounters' or aimless walks.) Perhaps somewhat melancholically, yet in a straightforward manner, the photographs by Kuimet draw attention to the new visual environment, recognising it as part of our culture, identity and 'the Estonian landscape'.

1 In fact, real estate advertisements announce that suburbs combine the conveniences of city with the comforts of country life, offering fresh air and natural environment to 'switch yourself off' from city noise, but still easy access to the city, whenever necessary. There are no discomforts in suburbs, it would seem.

2 The term itself dates back to the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), where the curator William Jenkins selected young American photographers Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Shore, but also Germans Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose photographs featured repetitive and inexpressive surfaces of the industrial society that dominated over beautiful and sublime nature.

3 Naturally, the concept of suburb itself has changed over time. Thus, its birth in America was not associated with privatisation, but the new idea of community. Being a member of a community was considered as important as returning to family life. Suburbs in social-democratic Western Europe carried similar values. It was not before the 1960s and 70s, but especially after the economic crisis and conservative turn in politics, that the earlier concept of suburbia was replaced by the model of market liberalism which prevails until this day. See, for example: Lynn Spigel, *The Suburban Home Companion: Television and the Neighborhood Ideal in Postwar America*. Beatriz Colomina (Ed.), *Sexuality and Space*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press 1972, p. 186 (pp. 185–217).

4 Safety, besides uniqueness, has become an important keyword to advertise 'real estate villages'. Peetri Development announces: "The houses are built next to no-through roads, creating a likeable, original-looking living environment. The neighbourhood is very safe for children and also offers favourable conditions for organising neighbourhood watch." www.peetriarendus.ee/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=45&lang=et

5 According to statistics, the percentage of Russian population

is the smallest in new residential areas. See, for example: Rein Ahas, *Valginnastumine, elustiil ja pendelränne Tallinnas: kas saame seda reguleerida?* www.britishcouncil.org/et/estonia-governance-ahas.ppt

6 Paradoxically, the aim of rationally organised modernist cities too was also to shunt aside all deviations from norm, the dirty and offensive.

7 Michel Foucault, *Überwachen und Strafen. Die Geburt des Gefängnisses* (1975). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1994, p. 181 ff.

8 An excellent example of the application of the principle of panoptical spaces is neighbourhood watch. A neighbour is not a fellow member of the community we live side by side with, but yet another stranger who poses a threat, if anything. Peetri Development has already thought about it: "The exteriors of all houses in the district are based on a single architectural concept, while interior design solutions vary. [...] This solution maintains the value of your property in the future. For instance, we have eliminated the possibility that someone could build an inappropriate house or plant a garden which would decrease the value of the properties of all other neighbours." www.peetriarendus.ee/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=45&lang=et

9 For the relations between photography and crime, see, for example: Walter Benjamin, *Little History of Photography* (1931). Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999, p. 527 (pp. 506–530); Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books 1985, p. 226 (pp. 217–251).

10 The role of the camera eye is to structure reality, which Victor Burgin has described as the 'subjective' effect of the camera. The viewer is projected into the photograph; Victor Burgin, *Looking at Photographs*. Victor Burgin (Ed.), *Thinking Photography*. Houndmills, London: Macmillan Press 1982, p. 146 (142–153).

11 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919). Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1990, p. 345 (335–376). According to Sigmund Freud, the strange, *unheimlich* or unhomely means something that unexpectedly intervenes with the familiar environment, causing uneasiness.

12 In 1967 Smithson published an article in *Artforum* magazine about his trip to Passaic near New York. Robert Smithson, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967). Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1996, p. 72 (68–74).

13 Robert Smithson, *Entropy and the New Monuments* (1966). Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, p. 11 (10–23).

14 Smithson, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, p. 74.

15 See: Ilit Ferber, *Melancholy Philosophy: Freud and Benjamin*. E-rea. *Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone* 4.1, 2006; <http://erea.revues.org/413>

16 Walter Benjamin has analysed the emptiness of the industrialising world that has lost its uniqueness, writing about the poetry by the 19th century Parisian poet Charles Baudelaire.

17 Burgin, *Looking at Photographs*, p. 153.