Supilinn, Tartu—The Lively Vernacular Against Urban Renewal: A Lefebvrian Critique

Nele Nutt¹, Mart Hiob¹, and Zenia Kotval²

Abstract
In today’s highly technical and rapidly changing world, the topic of people-friendly living has become increasingly acute. Therefore, great attention is paid to create new spaces (and transform unpleasant ones). In this race, to create new spaces, however, vernacular sites that are already people friendly have been forgotten or they are taken for granted. This article explores a neighborhood, which has evolved into a valuable living environment after hundreds of years of development characterized by weak planning and design. However, current efforts to regenerate the area may actually ruin the valuable vernacular environment. The authors have worked with this historic area for over 10 years and are familiar with the people and environments in depth. The longitudinal research allows one to observe and compare many different aspects of urban development (urban analysis, people’s values, adopted spatial plans, etc.) to provide insights to the question of what characterizes the lively city.

Keywords
Estonia, community activity, gentrification, urban revitalization, urban planning, social diversity

Introduction
The notion of liveable cities is by no means a new topic of discussion, yet most current literature emphasizes measurable indicators and tangible physical elements of planning and design. It almost seems easier to quantify the elements of liveable space rather than some abstract notion of topophilia or social integration. The authors of this article contend that physical amenities and strong design are not enough to create truly liveable spaces. The simple truth is that people use and create liveable space. If one removes human interaction from the equation, space has no meaning. It is the use of space, embodied by culture, heritage, and collective attitude that make spaces and places different. Imagine, for example, a street: The streetscape and nature of the street changes dramatically from place to place. Even a neighborhood street in a typical subdivision in the United States is different than one in South America or Estonia. The street could serve a simple utilitarian function of transporting people and vehicles in and out of homes, where efficient movement has the highest priority. On the other hand, the street could also function as an extension of the living room, acting as a space where children play and neighbors congregate for a movie screening. In this version of the public street, the role of the automobile is secondary to the community.

The notion of liveability being messy or chaotic from the outside is not a new phenomenon. Authors such as Jacobs, Lynch, Yi-Fu Tuan, Tafuri, and Ganz have written extensively about the importance of place and the connection between people and space. Social interactions and

¹Tallinn Technical University of Estonia, Tallinn, Estonia
²Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

Corresponding Author:
Zenia Kotval, School of Planning Design and Construction, Michigan State University, 552 W. Circle Drive, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA.
Email: kotval@msu.edu
cultural values play a significant role in contributing to liveability. Therefore, while measurable indicators of liveability are cited often in current literature and perhaps provide a simpler, more logical understanding of space, the authors believe that further analysis is necessary. The authors will expand on this notion through the case of Supilinn, a long-standing neighborhood in Tartu, Estonia.

Today, Supilinn is considered one of the most attractive areas in Tartu to invest. Real estate prices in this neighborhood have risen at a rate second only to the central business district. Ironically, however, only 30 years ago, this neighborhood was considered a slum. With minimal planning involved in its growth along with continued neglect from developers, the area faced threat of demolition. Yet these conditions slowly came to play an unintended role in garnering support for preservation of the area. Characterized by narrow, unpaved roads, integrated courtyards, and small wooden homes facing the street, along with eclectic forms of refurbishment as a result of small-scale renovations through the years, these features gave the neighborhood its unique identity. Are these defining features proving to attract a new generation of residents eager to share in this historic area, or are these newcomers trying to impose more order and refinement to the neighborhood? This article aims to explore these issues in the context of Supilinn and its many public spaces.

Theoretical Roots

“Cities—like books—can be read,” claimed Richard Rogers (2012). It is not enough to read, the next step is understanding. The hardest is to plan the future in a way that is based on read material and the comprehension of the material. The topic of living space is broad, spreading in all directions and combining a composite network. Existing space can simultaneously be historical, social, physical, cultural, phenomenological, semiotic, and so on. How to take all these aspects into account and which one to emphasize over others, are the questions proposed to all scientists dealing with urban space.

The article stems from the approach of 20th-century French social scientist Henri Lefebvre and his contributions to the theory of urban space. His most influential work is considered to be “La Production de l’Espace,” first published in 1974 (Lefebvre, 1991), which other authors (e.g., Soja, 1995, 2002) have developed further. As a social scientist, Lefebvre viewed urban space primarily as the opportunity for social interactions in the physical environment; moreover, the level of social interactions makes up the key criteria in determining the quality of space. In his view, a society incapable of creating functional urban space will not reach its potential as a community.

Since the Athens Charter of 1933, modernist planning principals have emphasized large-scale construction to bring the material welfare to ordinary people (Alexander, 2002). The well-known ideologist of modernism, Le Corbusier, argued that towns should be built using human rationality, and that self-grown structures prevalent in European towns since Roman times should be avoided (Fishman, 1977). The idea to promote public interests at the expense of capitalist profit was welcomed as democratic and humane. Even though the basic modernist forms were derived from human measures (Curtis, 1986), the implementation ignored simple rules of human behavior. Emphasis on health and safety issues involving fresh air, sunlight, and private space ignored the fundamental needs that humans have as social beings to establish interactions with their built and natural environments. This search for an ideal balance that would combine the capacities of industrialized construction with the creation of high-quality living spaces has not succeeded.

After World War II, large living quarters were built to house citizens of middle and lower income. The practice soon met heavy criticism from both scientists and civilians, one of the most prominent being Jane Jacobs. Critics focused on the lack of creativity within the structures built according to the principals of the Athens Charter. The large lots of block structures do little in promoting human interactions or bolstering a sense of community. Still, modernist urban planning has been hard to change even in progressive countries such as Norway (Sahl, 2012).

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, refused to see space as a binary of perceived or planned space that is then conceived and produced as built space. According to him, in a capitalist
society, space is planned, produced, and formed by human activities (Lefebvre, 1991). Spatial insights do not factor on the conception and production of physical space alone but thrive on nonphysical elements brought to bear by using, experiencing, and living in the space. The third dimension that brings space to life is of crucial value. In Lefebvre’s theory, there are three integral spatial parts, a so-called conceptual trialectics (Graphic 1), that include the components of perceived spatial practices (the production and reproduction of spatial relations between objects and products, in short, “built space”), space of representations (a plan or sketch depicting what space should look like “conceived space”), and representational spaces (“lived spaces or evolved as users fashion it). Lefebvre’s conceptualization of space allows one to argue for the importance of vernacular architecture and the liveliness of urban areas that have evolved over time against the inanimate qualities created through rational planning approaches.

Spatial practices are carried out in everyday life in the physical environment where we conduct our social interactions. Spatial practices are most often taken for granted, such as the visual space of the consumer who treats space as a means to carry out everyday tasks (Haamer, 2008). The second level is the representations of space, such as planning documents and project designs, along with more abstract ideas that contribute to the development of physical space. These representations always involve political ideology, power, and specific knowledge connected with the representations (Merrifield, 2000). In spatial projects, experts force the everyday environment and spatial experiences into the abstract specialist’s plans using standardized spatial terminology and discourse. Many people are under the influence of these ideas but only a few have the full opportunity and capability to participate in the production of the representations of space. This is not a lively level—it is standardized and static (Lefebvre, 1991). The third level of representational spaces refers to spaces lived directly through the associated images and symbols of inhabitants (Lefebvre, 1991). These spaces are lively, connected with life experience, coded and noncoded and nonverbal symbols (Haamer, 2008). This is the dominant but simultaneously passive experience of space that the imagination tries to alter and improve (Lefebvre, 1991). This level is created through personification and is characteristic of artists, writers, and scientists who contemplate their surroundings while searching for feelings, meanings, and symbols. This level is also characterized by a thoughtful, sensitive people, who have created for themselves, a world full of significance is continuously evolving or under refinement (Haamer, 2008).

Geographer and spatial planner Edward William Soja has modified Lefebvre’s concept by calling the material and empirical room for FirstSpace that is developed through abstract and ideological imaginary SecondSpace. The third level is at the same time real and imaginary ThirdSpace where the crucial role is played by symbols, signs, and meanings (Soja, 2002).

Representational spaces are the basis for pleasant environments where people prefer to live and spend their time. We may conclude that the quality of living spaces for individual inhabitants is determined by the quality of social relations that lead to the meaningful personification of the space. The social relations, in turn, are influenced by the material environment that again in today’s society is largely determined by planning.

In measuring the quality of the living space, it remains vital to include the opinion of the inhabitants or primary users. We may identify qualities of the space by exploring a specific location and determining a number of so-called soft indicators that the primary users name as important for their quality assessment. These indicators are both physical and social or a combination of social use of physical space. The indicators used here are place-specific, but some may be transferable and for general use. The mentioned indicators may be used as important data when creating new living spaces or attempting to improve an existing area.
The research district of Supilinn is located in the city of Tartu, Estonia (Figure 1). Supilinn is a central historic district that borders the medieval city center and the river Emajõgi. Supilinn belonged to Tartu in medieval times but was not included in the fortified city boundaries. A few streets date from the medieval era but the orthogonal street network that dominates today dates from the first decade of the 19th century. Seventy percent of the buildings—one- to two-story small wooden apartment houses—are from the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, with about 15% built in the period between 1930 and 1960 and the remainder constructed since then (Hiob & Nutt, 2010).

About 2,000 inhabitants reside in Supilinn. The neighborhood is known for its student residents and local artists, but the majority of the area has consisted of working-class people since the final decades of the 19th century. Occasionally, affluent families have also resided in Supilinn (Teedema, 2010). During the Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1941 and 1944 to 1991, the area was viewed as outdated and eventually slated for demolition, yet these plans were never carried out. In recent decades, the area has gained popularity as a central historic district while developing a strong neighborhood community (Hiob, Nutt, Nurme, & De Luca, 2012).

From 2010 to 2012, a number of research projects were carried out to obtain data about both the social and physical environment of Supilinn while gaining clarity on the residents’ values. This article concentrates on determining which characteristics not commonly mentioned in literature are important in promoting social comfort and enhancing the quality of life in urban spaces, so that these concerns may be included when assessing the existing urban environment, introducing improvements, and planning new residential areas. The primary source for these data involves 11 qualitative, in-depth interviews of selected residents familiar with the neighborhood study area. The interviewees were selected to form a diverse range of ages, gender, education, and professional background, and were conducted by an impartial sociologist in June 2011. The support for the identified values was validated through a popular survey that was sent to all households in two exemplars in November 2011.
The 2011 survey was conducted within the project titled “Using Participatory Planning Methods in the Supilinn Thematic Plan” by Supilinn Society, Estonian Planners’ Association and Tartu City Government, and financed by the National Foundation of Civil Society. The survey was distributed to all residents in the Supilinn district, for a total of 1,152 paper questionnaires (two in every mailbox with possibility to ask for additional exemplars). There were approximately 1,250 adult residents in Supilinn according to official data. A total of 286 questionnaires were returned, with the youngest respondent 16 years old and the oldest, 85 years old. The majority of respondents were between 25 and 45 years old, 59% were female and 41%, male. Over half of the respondents represented households with children. The proportion of respondents with higher education (64%) was extraordinary high. Seven percent responses were from retired persons, with 9% from students. Respondents were distributed evenly from all streets within the Supilinn district.

**Findings**

The results of the poll illustrated that in general, local residents considered Supilinn a pleasant neighborhood with a very high living quality. The interviewees cited specific aspects that they enjoyed within the historical setting of Supilinn and identified recent and pending developments that may threaten these existing values. A selection of resident comments and values are presented in Table 1.

The historic vernacular environments appear to be in clear contrast with newer modern developments. The residents’ attitudes measured in the poll appeared to favor the characteristics of the historical environment with its characteristics over the new. The case was most clear in obvious deteriorative factors of the living quality like the increase in motorized traffic (opposed by 99% of the respondents). At the same time, high value was attributed to not equally self-evident aspects like social diversity (valued as important by 75%) and large empty spaces inside the city blocks (valued by 91%). People also strongly opposed modern buildings in relation to the historical ones—84% said that new buildings should be designed in relation to the already-present vernacular styles, and only 10% preferred modern buildings. Overall, 47% did not approve of any new buildings and 45% agreed with a slow renewal of the urban environment instead of abrupt changes.

**Table 1. Comparison of Features in Historical and New Environments.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of historical environment</th>
<th>New, developed environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Polyfunctional courtyards where different activities take place

The gardens are not fenced in a prohibitive way—the gardens attract a feeling of openness

It is possible to enter in courtyards for enjoyment and curiosity

In apartment houses' courtyards, all households have to work together and take into account the neighbor's necessities

The houses open directly to the street, you step from doorway straight to the street

Diverse environment, full of details

Environment with houses, fences, etc., have their defects and damages

Unpaved streets with little space for cars

Versatile image

Streets are for all—children play, dogs run about, people promenade, cars and cyclists drive

Structured, split up, creek-like courtyards

Inside city blocks and by the river bank, there are large wastelands open to everybody that children use for play

Social diversity, there are people from various social groups in the same house

Homes are a bit messy

Design in human scale of low and narrow houses, narrow streets

Open, friendly people who gladly converse and spend time in public space

This discussion leads to some clear distinctions between the vernacular architecture and newer forms of development in this small neighborhood that can be easily transferred to similar areas. We present these indicators by contrasting factors, with photographs from the neighborhood to keep our analyses practical and grounded.

Old Versus New

One might assume that older neighborhoods with specific defining features, along with factors such as nostalgia and topophilia, play a role in making people remember these spaces more fondly. In this way, the perceived space then becomes more valuable than the physical space. Older, longtime residents often remember “the good old days” of a simpler way of life when they were younger and healthier. Others may recall the hardships of life and have associated memories not nearly as pleasant, viewing the area as a place to be forgotten and left behind. Alternatively, the “lived in” character, or the notion of a known place, might be more comforting than an unknown, foreign place. The survey in Supilinn indicated that the people most satisfied with their district were those who had resided there for 2 to 8 years (82% answered they enjoyed their neighborhood) and 18 years or more (90%). Clearly, people who had in Supilinn less than 2 years were less content (73%) as well as those who have lived there between 9 and 17 years (69%). We may assume then, that the oldest residents seemed the most content, along with the newcomers that had settled in and had time to adopt the values of the neighborhood (lived there for at least 2 years). One possibility for negative responses from the
group that had resided in Supilinn between 9 and 17 years might involve financial factors that forced the citizens into the area, instead of by their own choice. Supilinn had one of the lowest real estate prices in Tartu up to a decade ago (Nutt, Hiob, & Nurme, 2012).

As different generations and different residents perceive space in their own ways, the decisions regarding the choice of older, vernacular styles over new, modern designs becomes a matter of personal preference (Figure 2).

**Order Versus Chaos**

Another major distinction can be drawn between urban space that has evolved over time and those spaces planned with a particular function in mind. Older neighborhoods grew slowly and out of necessity. Renovations and modifications happened gradually over time as money became available and the need for repair grew evident. As such, these older neighborhoods contain a vernacular, cluttered, and chaotic feel to them, while newer spaces created with different functions in mind may seem more orderly and planned.

As recently as a few decades ago, Supilinn was considered to be a desolate neighborhood designated for demolition. Today, while much of that image of the worn, tired, and disordered district still exists, it is embraced wholeheartedly by the residents. The lack of obligation to keep the lawn neatly trimmed or the house freshly painted allows for freedom in behavior, use of clothes, and in social interactions. Somehow, one can tell the difference between ignorance and disregard on one side and the absence of unnecessary, decorative efforts on the other. Limited maintenance can be good as long as it does not threaten the usability and long-term survival of urban structures or detract from local aesthetics.

One of Supilinn’s virtues is the limited order that appears on the city block level, down to small architectural details and even social behavior. While there are restrictions on density, site lines, and building heights, there remains much freedom within the building envelope. The historical houses feature few straight angles, the fences are tilted or skewed and many gardens appear wild and unused. On the contrary, the new houses constructed in stone (and covered with wooden boards) feature standardized measurements and sharp edges, with plots that have clear functional distinction and smooth renovated streets (Figure 3).

The use of courtyards and gardens signifies one of the greatest differences between old and new spaces. Older yards have no clear parameters, undefined without the presence of fences, curbs, or hedges. These lively spaces feature various activities, with laundry hanging out to dry (Figure 4), pumpkins growing in gardens, cats running on shed roofs, and children climbing trees. In contrast, boundaries of newer yards are well defined and clearly marked—walking paths are laid in stone, playgrounds are confined within low fences, and parking areas are bordered by stone curbs. These new yards are not as suitable for informal social interactions, with even their areas reserved specifically for outdoor barbecue gatherings seeming forced.

---

**Figure 2.** Homely century-old houses from the 19th century (left) and a stark new house from 2010. Source. Nutt (2010, 2012).
While the functionality of these new developments have merit, the untamed, evolving nature of the old spaces are both functional and perhaps more naturally desired by residents.

Public Versus Private Orientation

According to 19th-century city planning principals used during the formation of Supilinn’s main streets, houses were to be constructed on the street line (Figure 5). In addition, a front door opening would always face the street, establishing direct contact between the public space and homes that encourages community interaction. Inversely, new houses are often set back from the traditional building line, creating a buffer zone between homes and the street that alienates residents from public street life.

Our survey of Supilinn residents reinforced how this informal use of space also directly influences attitudes regarding neighborliness and public acceptance. People tend to feel safe and confident that their neighbors have their “eyes on the street,” encouraging residents to interact with each other and not remain behind locked doors and barred gates. A familiarity grows among neighbors as children play together on the street outside their homes. In contrast, the new residential areas feature automated gates and electronic locks on outer doors that secure residents into private, encapsulated living.

Another notable aspect of Supilinn involves the perception of expansive, underutilized open spaces. These areas are found both within city blocks and along the river banks. Longtime residents and those who appreciate the historic value of the neighborhood tend to view these areas as opportunities for creative, multipurpose uses. These spaces are also utilized by
children as adventurous playgrounds, by others as places for relaxation and meditation, and by the neighborhood as a whole in organizing collective activities and street fairs. In this sense, these open spaces are seen by residents as a blessing and opportunity for community engagement. At the same time, outsiders look on these areas as wastelands, dangerous to children, and magnets for the unruly and homeless. They see these areas lacking in order and planning, and have trouble grasping the significance of this changing, volatile open space, viewing only orderly, controlled public space as valuable (Figure 6).

**Simple Versus Sophistication**

Traditional Supilinn houses feature simple design and modest decorations. The facades follow a symmetrical distribution of windows and doors. Since the houses are relatively small—two full stories and not more than 30 meters in length—and there are no identical houses, the uniformity of single houses is not boring for the environment. On the contrary, the simple solutions yield a feeling of safety and balance the overall versatile image.

New houses often showcase attractive, modern designs that try deliberately to differ from historical buildings by the addition of extravagant features (Figure 7).
Motorized Versus Pedestrian Dominance

Visibility of children serves as an indicator for the level of use of an outdoor space. One will find children constantly playing in both the yards of old houses and in the public streets (Figure 8). Yards of newer homes, many of which function primarily as parking lots, feature very little recreational activity. Traditionally, cobblestone was used in paving driving lanes of the streets, while brick or natural stone plates were used for pedestrian walkways. Cobblestone pavement discouraged high speeds and dense traffic on streets and suited the traditional look of historic homes. Newer methods of asphalt and concrete stone paving, however, favor motorized transport and discourage public use of the streets. This need for modern, functional elements such as paved streets detracts from the informal social interaction and use of perceived space. The focus on motorized transport over pedestrian use further isolates people from the streets and their neighborhood community.

Conclusion

Good planning practice should produce living spaces that are not represented just by physical objects and spaces between them but appreciate the evolution of that space as users modify and adapt the space to everyday life and liveability. Spatial insights not only correspond to the first and second level of Lefebvre’s conceptual trialectics—spatial practices and representation of spaces—but also eventually become representational spaces that possess greater significance for their everyday users. The discussion between liveliness versus banality are perhaps better understood by referring to broader works such as Rob Sheilds (1998) that link Lefebvre’s work on space to his other important concepts of everyday life. Planning successful new living spaces while improving and maintaining already existing public spaces requires vast knowledge and experience. There are examples of great achievements, yet not all newly created spaces achieve
the label of truly “lived space.” There are indications that certain structure of residential buildings (including the position of different buildings, their height, and number of apartments) either encourages or hinders the creation of meaningful social living space (Haamer, 2007).

Successful living space is not necessarily always planned—these spaces may evolve as a result of unintended consequences. Supilinn provides a good example, with its large unused spaces that may appear to outsiders as wastelands but are actively used by residents and viewed as valuable assets. These lots serve as playgrounds for children, public meeting places for residents, and community spaces for larger activities such as concerts and festivals. People often do not use places in the intended or planned manner. Streets may transform into extended living rooms and playgrounds rather than access roads, while vacant plots give rise to community gardens. In this sense strong living space is created by local residents and community interactions instead of rigid criteria determined by outsiders, although this may not always coincide with the vision of the local government. Observing the various ways people use space serves as an essential component to the creation of successful living space. Obtaining the opinions and desires of the people becomes critical, especially when attempting to improve existing neighborhoods; otherwise, the danger exists of destroying an already well-functioning and thriving community.

The regulatory criteria used in planning documents do not always guarantee successful living spaces. In some cases, unnecessary regulations, particularly those that relate to aesthetics and design standards, act as an obstacle for impromptu social networking that can evoke creative uses of space. Strong living spaces are created only through their use by the community, as some spaces that may appear well designed will inevitably grow cold and sterile if not utilized by residents. Public spaces that may appear messy or chaotic come alive because of the people and their activities. People watching can be a wonderful pastime where one perceives their surroundings to be inviting and comfortable even if no amenities actually exist. While the need for health and safety remains apparent, sometimes, regulations such as parking standards and setback distances interfere with the optimal use of space. Too often, officials are more concerned with the quantitative indicators of physical space rather than the qualitative interactions of actual people within the space.

While there continues to be much discussion within planning and design professions regarding liveable cities and places for people, there remains a need to truly understand the basic needs of people and how they function in space. Imagined space or the perception of space is often confused with reality. Areas such as Supilinn keep evolving and thriving despite efforts to clear them away.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note


References

Alexander, D. (2002). The resurgence of place: Modernism is out and building places that fit with the environment and local aspirations is in. Alternatives Journal, 28(Summer), 16.


Author Biographies

Nele Nutt is a lecturer in the Department of Landscape Architecture, Tallinn University of Technology, Tartu College. She is a PhD candidate with a research focus on sustainable communities and the power of neighborhood organizations. She founded Supilinna Selts, one of the first organized neighborhood associations in Estonia. She is also Founding Member of the Estonian Society of Landscape Architects.

Mart Hiob is a lecturer in the Department of Landscape Architecture, Tallinn University of Technology, Tartu College. He is a PhD candidate with a research focus on sustainable communities and the power of neighborhood organizations. He founded Supilinna Selts, one of the first organized neighborhood associations in Estonia. He is also Founding Member of the Estonian Society of Landscape Architects.

Zenia Kotval is a professor of urban and regional planning at Michigan State University. She was a Fulbright Specialist at Tallinn Technical University in 2012 and continues to be an adjunct professor with Tartu College.