Before the 20th century Estonians had had no experience of being a nation. Together with Finns, Latvians, Slovaks and the Irish, they are one of but a few peoples in Europe, who had always been peasants and never had an aristocracy of their own. Before the national awakening in the 19th century, before Estonians began to develop into a modern people, they had not built anything on a grand scale or to perform a representational function. Within the context of Historicism they lacked a golden age to look back on. Of course, there existed the folk mythology of the ancient pre-Christian period of freedom before the invasion by the German crusaders in the 13th century, which stimulated national ideologies, but little could be drawn in terms of inspiration from the wooden strongholds of that era for architectural projects in the 20th century.

The dream of national independence had not been long held. At the beginning of the 20th century, nationalist circles were merely fighting to become an autonomous region within Tsarist Russia. Independence came in 1918, after various unexpected factors presented an opportunity that had to be taken advantage of. In the wake of the First World War and the revolutions that followed, the powers of the time, Tsarist Russia and Emperor Wilhelm’s Germany, which during the war had occupied Estonia, collapsed, and so it made sense to embark upon national self-determination.

Estonia’s largest city, the once prosperous Hanseatic Tallinn (in German: Reval) had during the previous centuries become a sleepy provincial centre within Tsarist Russia. Not even industrialization or the building of a railway had given it a new lease of life. Although the Lutheran Ostseeprovinzen were some of the more progressive parts of Russia, the country as a whole was poor and underdeveloped. Just like the newly created nation, the capital Tallinn did not have a working infrastructure to deal with its new responsibilities.

The first architectural expressions of the new Estonian nation were community halls, which were built in cities and country areas at the beginning of the 20th century. These were mostly designed by Finnish architects because the first generation of Estonian architects had not yet emerged. The Constituent Assembly in 1919 met in the “Estonia” cultural centre designed by the architects Armas Lindgren and Wivi Lönn in 1908–1913, which was the largest new and
manifestly Estonian public building in Tallinn. But it was owned by the cultural society and primarily intended for social activities, and hence, the state governing body could not remain here indefinitely.

The question of where to locate the new symbol of democracy, a building with a specific function where more than 100 representatives could discuss laws in a single room, was a problem faced by all the countries newly formed according to the Versailles system: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia etc. The existing administrative buildings in these countries were symbolic of foreign powers and due to the unpleasant historical associations the new leaders did not want to identify themselves with them. But on the other hand, to leave them unused would have been a waste. While the politicians primarily dreamed of pompous parliamentary buildings, such as those in Bern and Belgrade, the architects saw these as out-dated sources of inspiration. Therefore, one can see quite a diverse variety of solutions. While the Finns built slowly with an entirely democratic process of decision-making and ended up with a completely new grand building, in the large city of Prague there were a number of grand unused nobleman’s palaces into which both chambers could be accommodated. Poland in turn added a large extension to an existing building. The Latvians, who were in an identical situation to the Estonians, located their Saeima in the building of the Livonian Knighthood. They exchanged only the figure of the last leader of the Livonian Knighthood, Wolter von Plettenberg, which stood above the door of the neo-renaissance palazzo (architects Robert Pflug and Jānis Baumanis, 1862–1867), for that of the Latvian mythological folk-hero, the bear-slayer Lacplesis. Tallinn also had a neo-renaissance building from the Estonian Knighthood (architect Georg Winterhalter, 1845–1848), but it was older and smaller, so it became the premises of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Historically, Estonia had always been governed from Toompea castle, formerly a medieval Ordensburg, which had survived fairly intact. Only the east wing had been rebuilt into a palace in 1767 for Catherine the Second by an architect from Jena, Johann Schultz. This was the seat of the provincial government and aimed to demonstrate the might power of Tsarist Russia in the

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4 The administrative division in the Tsarist Russia did not follow the border between Estonian and Latvian speaking population. The so-called Lutheran Baltic provinces (Ostseeprovinzen) consisted of Estonia (Estland) in actual the Northern Estonia, Livonia (Lifland) in the Southern Estonia and in the Eastern Latvia and Couronia (Kurland) in the Western Latvia.
newly captured Estonian and Latvian territories after the defeat of the Swedes in the Great Northern War. The central part of the castle was the Konventshaus (Convent House), which, during the 19th century, had served as the prison of the provincial government. During the February Revolution of 1917, the castle was stormed, the prisoners were freed and the prison set alight. When the newly formed Estonian government moved into the rooms in Toompea castle that had formerly been used by the provincial government, after the brief period when the Bolsheviks had been in power, it was unpleasant to look out onto the courtyard at the burnt walls of the convent building cum prison. Therefore, the Constituent Assembly decided to replace these by building something that was of utmost importance for the new nation – a parliament or in Estonian a Riigikogu (National Assembly) building.

The Riigikogu building, built from 1920–1922 by architects Herbert Johanson and Eugen Habermann, was positioned on the walls of the old convent building. The building of Estonia’s first government building in Toompea castle cemented the continuity of the location as a seat of power. At the same time, it claimed this former symbol of foreign power, as essentially Estonian. Unlike the Finns and Poles, the Estonians erected their parliamentary building quickly, unhindered by the post-war financial chaos and democratic processes and without an architectural competition. This determined and resolute action might well be the reason that such an unconventional parliamentary building was built – it is one of the most avant-garde parliamentary buildings in the world. Consequently, I will provide an interpretation of the Riigikogu building in the context of political architectural history, and where the choice of style turns out to be unexpectedly significant and where a surprising amount of parliamentary symbolism may be found.

The architects

The job of designing the Riigikogu building was entrusted to two young and relatively inexperienced architects. Herbert Johanson (1884–1864) and Eugen Habermann (1884–1844) were from the first generation of Estonian architects of whom few had been able to start work before the First World War, but who were to have an instrumental role in Estonia between the wars. This generation, born in the 1880s, had mainly studied at the Riga Polytechnic Institute, the only technical tertiary institution in the Ostseeprovinzen in Tsarist Russia. Even though the wave of russification in the 1890s meant that the school was mainly Russian speaking, it was still dominated by a Baltic–German spirit. Due to the students’ participation in the revolution of 1905, it was best for them to
leave Riga for a while. Herbert Johanson studied for a few years in Darmstadt Technical University and Eugen Habermann in Dresden. Both cities were important centres of art and art reform. At that time there was still an artist colony at Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt and the Expressionist group Die Brücke in Dresden was formed by local architecture students. From 1909 until 1910 Eugen Habermann worked in the bureau of the well-known architect Fritz Schumacher in Dresden. After returning to the Baltics they received their diplomas in Riga at the beginning of the 1910s. After the war, in 1920, they already had some experience and were starting to build up the new nation in Tallinn.

Between 1919 and 1923 Eugen Habermann worked in Tallinn as the head of the Building Office at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which put him in charge of the Riigikogu building project. Due to the fact that Eugen Habermann had many administrative responsibilities, most the work concerning the Riigikogu building was handled by Herbert Johanson, who was helped by a russified German, Boris Krümmer (1884–post 1932), who came from Saint Petersburg and worked in an academic style. The plans by Krümmer are easily distinguishable and his impact on the symmetry of the spaces is evident. In the body of work by Herbert Johanson and Eugen Habermann, the Expressionist Riigikogu building is an exception because their work in the 1920s was predominantly Traditionalist and in the early 1930s they moved towards Functionalism. Habermann and Johanson also had a joint architecture bureau from 1920 to 1923, which was quite active. After this, Johanson headed the Tallinn planning bureau until immigrating to Sweden in 1944, and Habermann worked as a freelancer until he died trying to escape to Germany in 1944 in the “Moero” disaster.

Location and construction

Construction of the Riigikogu building in the courtyard of Toompea castle was not straightforward (fig. 1). The western side towering above the cliff had retained its medieval fortress-like appearance, while the east wing, the Provincial Government building, which formed a passageway leading into the courtyard and to the front of the Riigikogu building, was in the style of a late baroque palace (fig. 2). From a continuity point of view, it was not necessary to oppose the various foreign powers – the Germans and Russians as symbolized by the

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Fig. 1: Tallinn Toompea upper city from west. In foreground the castle during the construction of the Riigikogu building on the grounds of medieval Konventshaus. Aerial view 1921.

Fig. 2: View to the Riigikogu building through the passageway under the Provincial Government building, 1922.
Gothic and Classical architecture – but rather to implement in their midst a new architecture, which spoke of the Estonians themselves. The newly independent Estonians did not want “other peoples’ old” architecture. None of the Historicist styles spoke of Estonians or Estonian culture; therefore, only the most contemporary architecture seemed appropriate. For Eugen Habermann and Herbert Johanson, who had predominantly been trained in the German cultural sphere, the style could only be Expressionism. This was a style born from the horrors of the First World War, individualistic and sculptural, primarily using modern geometric motifs with intense colours, and rising in popularity at the beginning of the 1920s, although this popularity faded in the middle of the decade.

After the fire in 1917, the unprotected ruins of the convent building were in such a poor state that, except for the west part of the stronghold wall and part of the northern wall of the convent, they were demolished. In the context of current day attitudes to preservation it is hard to imagine demolishing the core of a medieval stronghold, but the young nation of that time hardly had time to think of such matters. It is also difficult to imagine, after the Landeswehr War, that any of the founders of the new nation would consider the convent building, a symbol of the German knights, as something to be preserved. Complete archaeological surveys were not even carried out; nevertheless, the architects did preserve the western wall and this was favourably received by the press, who referred to it as restoration. The convent building itself, in the courtyard between the monumental western wall of the stronghold and the palace-like eastern wall, was not considered to be an imposing enough building worthy of preservation. It was just a formless cluster of buildings, which had accumulated over time, and what was needed was a large single room, which the convent building did not provide.

The Riigikogu building was built in a post-war era of chaos, before state institutions (the Constituent Assembly and the Ministry for Internal Affairs both claimed to be the client, and during the construction period the government changed a number of times) or construction companies had been properly established. In addition, the building process was hampered by lack of materials and inflation. The shortage of funds is most apparent in the un-decorated appearance of the building, but this was not necessarily bad, quite the opposite, it forced the architects to find unusual and original solutions.

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7 N. a.: Toompea müürid ja tornid ehitatakse üles endisel kujul [Toompea Walls and Towers will be restored], in: Vaba Maa [Free Country]. 1921, 19. apr.
Architecture directs the representatives of the people

The facade of the Riigikogu building is symmetrical and rendered, which ensured that it suited the palace style of the provincial government building (fig. 3). It was also painted steel grey, which suited the limestone walls of the stronghold. Below the high roof, the facade, with its few small windows, is inward looking and closed, and its Traditionalist style works well with the non-classical, non-stylish architecture of the stronghold. Under the edge of the roof runs a geometric cornice of unexpectedly inverted tetrahedrons, and the windows of the assembly chamber are surrounded by a geometric framework of black Karelian granite. Both of these features heralded the shocking new Expressionist aesthetic.

Lining up the undated and unsigned sketches of the facade\(^8\) drawn in pencil on tracing paper, held in the Estonian Museum of Architecture, one can reconstruct the story of an ordinary classical facade as it develops into an Expressionist one. The classical decorations and the uniform rhythm of many of the windows is gradually replaced by a rhythm of bare walls between windows that highlights the unexpectedly bold zigzag decoration surrounding the windows of the assembly chamber indicating the heart of the building.

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From the light-filled courtyard of the castle one enters the building through a low ceilinged, dimly lit vestibule (fig. 4). The contrast between the light and dark sections in the vestibule not only hints at the medieval stronghold, where the Riigikogu is situated, but its dramatic effect is like the lighting effects in a Friedrich Murnau film.

But when lit with electric lighting, the vestibule assumes a completely different spatial feeling. The ceiling is covered with a uniform concrete expanse of inverted pyramids, at the centre of which, there is an electric light globe (fig. 5). The low ceiling of the vestibule did not permit the use of traditional pendant lights derivative of chandeliers, or the use of reflected light. Therefore the lighting had to be cleverly integrated into the ceiling itself. The inverted pyramids may seem like a development of the coffered ceiling in classical architecture, but with their bulbs radiating light they are something else altogether. They are like glowing crystals, which could be a reference to the crystal motif that was popular in architecture at the beginning of the century.\(^9\) Rejecting a traditional hierarchical centripetal ceiling design in favour of a uniform ceiling provided an important metaphor for democracy in a nation freshly emerging from a class-based society and establishing itself as a nation of equal citizens. Even though the

number of pyramids ($6 \times 12$) does not correspond to the number of representatives (120, today 101), the crystal structure of the space, leading into the rest of the building, suggests that the equally ranked representatives must pass legislation with minds that are crystal-clear and pure. The architecture reminds them that as representatives of the people they sit at the top of the new social pyramid and it is their responsibility to shine the light on the people. Naturally, this well ordered cloud of light also relates to the important Expressionist idea of Bruno Taut’s crystal cathedral that looks to the bright future.

The design of the journalist’s foyer on the western side of the assembly chamber is worth mentioning (fig. 6–7). Here a dark brown, groined arch extends across the room while the transition to the pale coloured wall is marked by a zigzag band with a black border at eye level. To emphasize architectural weight, the usual language of colour is turned on its head. An extra touch is provided by two window reveal stones depicting paradise tree-of-life motifs – the well-known fertile grapevine and a full-seeded thistle. These were discovered during the building process in the old convent building, and are now set on either side of the door to the staircase. These reveal stones date to the beginning of the 16th century.\textsuperscript{10} The crude cutting of the reliefs matched the architects’ pursuit of a rustic feeling, and the dispersion of seeds refers to journalism’s mission to spread

\textsuperscript{10} Villem Raam: Toompea linnuse ja lossi ehitusoolisest minevikust [About the architectural past of the Toompea castle and palace], in: Toompea. Tallinn 1978, 39.
Mart Kalm

ideas, or at the very least to communicate. The positioning of the stones in the wall follows traditional concepts, and instead of placing them in the centre of a bare surface they now stand like sentries closely guarding the doorway.

The architectural culmination of the Riigikogu building is the assembly chamber located directly above the vestibule (fig. 8). The long box-like room extends through two floors and the ceiling arches up into the roof space. In the

Fig. 6: Herbert Johanson and Eugen Habermann. Plan of the ground floor of the Riigikogu building, 1920.
upper and side sections there are two public galleries that extend out like pockets. The cave-like quality of the press boxes – the deep dark irregular shaped burrows in the back wall of the assembly chamber – below the public gallery, can also be considered Expressionist. On the one hand, the cave, as Zarathustra’s dwelling place, was a much loved motif in Expressionist architecture,\textsuperscript{11} while

on the other hand, it suited the fortress environment, which the parliament building from time to time made reference to. It was not possible to get to the assembly chamber directly from the press box, but when the representatives exited through the door in the rear wall, the journalists coming out of their box could easily pounce on them.\footnote{Nowadays the press is not any more located in the boxes in the assembly chamber but above these in the balcony for the public. The journalists still descend for interviews at the rear wall door of the assembly chamber.}

Since the assembly chamber is side-on to the south, then even despite the small windows, the room is filled with warmth and light. To balance this, on the opposite side, behind the public gallery, the windows let in the cold northern light. Lamps do not hang from the ceiling, but are positioned behind a zigzag cornice, and electric light is reflected evenly down from the pleated ceiling. At the time, this solution seemed mystical because the unseen light source made it difficult to decorate the room. Below the zigzag cornice is a frieze of balls that provided ventilation.

The interior design was shockingly non-traditional, and not only because it did not employ an amphitheatre (which admittedly the architects had attempted

Fig. 8: The assembly chamber of the Riigikogu building, 1922.
Representation of a nation without a glorious past

...fit in at an earlier design stage), but also due to the Expressionist colour scheme with its ultramarine walls, rust-brown reveals and lemon yellow ceiling. Photographs taken on completion show a dark ceiling, but this could be an exaggeration caused by the photographic emulsions of the time because a colour ultrasound conducted during restoration work in 1995 showed the ceiling had never been dark. The walls were completely bare, but all the reveals around the openings were evenly covered with a zigzag relief by the sculptor Jaan Koort creating an effective contrast to the smoothness of the walls and the bare angled surfaces. The intense wall-ceiling colour scheme of the 1920s is further augmented by the green fabric on the representative’s desks. The birch furniture, designed by Johanson is light coloured but has dark inlays complimented by the plush upholstery fabric from Manchester that is almost black. The design of the furniture reveals the desire in Expressionism to become free from classical stylistic devices and communicates an interest in basic geometric forms (fig. 9).

When the members were being given a guided tour of the building, they asked the architects about the cornice, which looked like a saw blade, and Eugen Habermann replied that the saw blade was meant to sharpen the wits of the members.\[13\] Even though Habermann was well known for his wit, it is still reasonable to read these design motifs as symbols of the parliament. The ceiling, the heavenly zone, and therefore most idealistic, was particularly full of references (fig. 10). Whether it be the grooves in the ceiling, the serrated cornice or the zigzags and triangles throughout the entire building it is always two surfaces coming up against each other reminding the members that everything must be assessed from both sides. Not that weighing the pros and cons is unique to parliament; the same takes place in courts of law and so forth. The pleated quality of the ceiling expresses respect for different opinions, a characteristic of democratic societies, but the white cornice draws the pleats tightly together as if it were causing the ceiling to bulge, and this speaks of the need to achieve a consensus in voting and turn the decision into legislation. In the furrows of the ceiling we begin to see a metaphor for ploughing the field of legislation.

The design of the reveals in the chamber, with their triangular jagged scales, like armour, can be seen as references to the need for laws to be watertight with no holes and that laws have a protective function. Along the centre of the scales on the reveals it is also possible to see a lightning bolt motif perhaps referring to the inevitable effect of legislation.

The ceiling of the assembly chamber has many sisters among public buildings in Europe at that time. The pleated ceiling of the assembly chamber with its jagged triangle motif, the Gothic references and the concealed lighting bears most similarity with the Viennese Crematorium built at almost the same time (architect Clemens Holzmeister, 1921–1923) and which provided a very effective start to the famous Viennese Expressionism of the 1920s. As evident from the

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\[13\] Kuusik 2011 (fn. 5), 75.
Fig. 9: The assembly chamber of the Riigikogu building, 2009.
enormous hall of the Berlin “Capitol” cinema (1925) by the German Expressionist, Hans Poelzig, the light radiating along behind the cornice provided, not only the motif of the crystal-cathedral, but also a good metaphor for film projections. Since a pendant lamp would have got in the way during the screening of a film, lighting concealed behind a geometric element became very popular in cinema architecture of the 1920s and 30s. The use of such devices, similar to that used in cinema architecture, indicates just to what extent the parliament building was part of the modern world.

In summary

The Riigikogu building – for Estonians, who did not have a glorious history and as a nation were searching for their architectural and socio-political position among the former powers of Germany and Russia – is not a hybrid of either but provides a successful compromise. Built on the architectural accumulation that is Toompea Castle, on the one hand, it represents a continuity of power. On the other hand, the Riigikogu building is a new and easily distinguishable type of architecture that clearly demonstrates who is in power now.

The most convincing argument for designing the Riigikogu building in an Expressionist style was the desire to make use of a completely new visual language to express something that was also completely new – the newly created
democratic Estonian nation. At the time of the birth of the new nation, around 1920, a fresh outburst of creativity engulfed all of Estonian culture, and this special state of mind was also expressed in the work of the Riigikogu architects. But the criticism levelled at the building on its completion in 1922 reflects a split that had developed during the course of building the nation, between the Estonian cultural elite and the political and business elite, which until then had supported each other.\textsuperscript{14} The criticism of the building was not particularly progressive, but was based on an out-dated aesthetic. French Academicism and its Russian derivation, both of which in the modern world were bastions of conservatism, would not have been appropriate to express the idea of independence. It would have also been difficult to incorporate it into the historic castle, whereas German Expressionism suited so much more naturally. Despite anti-German sentiments in Estonian society, the fraternity of Estonian architects, as well as professionals in other fields, were trained within the German cultural sphere. Even though Expressionism was primarily a phenomenon of the German cultural sphere, at that time it was not attributed with being specifically German, but it was seen as being unprecedentedly modern. It was important for the new nation that its parliament building was not an old hand-me-down.