Estonia, the northernmost of the three Baltic states, regained its independence as nation state in 1991, which it had lost with the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939 and the Soviet occupation of Eastern and Central Europe during the Cold War. Its earlier period of independence, from 1918 to 1940, was short lived and from the outbreak of hostilities in the Second World War, the country suffered the loss of a significant portion of its ethnic population through emigration and deportation, only to have it replaced by Soviet migrants and military units. For the majority of ethnic Estonians much of the twentieth century was an immensely traumatic experience and with the restoration of independence in 1991 came the hope that the nation might pick up from where it left off more than fifty years before. This chapter concerns the Estonian National Museum which was created as a part of the national movement in 1909 and which then established itself as an important symbol of national memory and identity. In the early 1990s, in the ‘period of national awakening’ when the country underwent major reform, there developed the idea of building a new Estonian National Museum. It arose in that period of hope and ideals, which straddled the moment when independence returned but it soon found itself locked in a period of pragmatism and economic reality (Runnel et al., 2009). Indeed, with large-scale economic turmoil sweeping Europe in 2009, doubts and questions began to emerge concerning the future of the project to build the museum and the value of a national museum to modern Estonian society.

The debate surrounding the erection of the new Estonian National Museum took place within what Michael Kennedy (2002) called the ‘transition culture’ that enveloped post-communist nations in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The initial liberation was a large-scale grass-root civic initiative, which soon was channelled into forming of the institutional structure of the new republic. It involved fundamental changes and efforts to build social order, technology and infrastructure and included disappointment and hard times when the economic recession hit the new republic. Lauristin and Vihalemm (2009) interpret this phenomenon as a field of mediation, where external demands from the pow-
erful international agencies are, through a specific ‘learning process’, turned into the value preferences and codes of behaviour of the actors within the transforming state; external definitions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are by these means ‘naturalised’ in evolving values and practices. The resulting blurring of internal and external agendas in this field of mediation has certainly been apparent in the processes involved in the establishment of new cultural institutions (Tali, Pierantoni, 2008a). Recent Western interest in major museum building projects, for example, has resulted in much debate about the spatial conceptualisation and impact of these institutions (Stead, 2004) which has spilled over into Estonian discussions of its new national museum. These have fostered expectations which variously see the museum as part of the rapidly developing creative industries, a contributor to the knowledge infrastructure, and a home for civic and ethnic nationalism.

Estonian conceptualisation of the museum and its social purpose was also undergone change. On the one hand, there has been the necessity to define identities at a time of rapid change by locating and securing old values and repaying history’s debts. The latter, in particular, had wide support, as the social disruption caused by the Soviet occupation destroyed lives, artefacts and institutions; now public opinion was in favour of re-establishing those things lost in both the cultural and political arenas. The reinvention of the museum has been closely connected to these questions of collective memory and collective identity, which have in turn also been affected by a return to the European fold.

This study has emerged from the fields of media and communication research and the anthropology of cultural production. It has applied an ethnographic methodology involving participant observation in meetings and in regular working practices, and analysis of different media sources. It draws upon Peterson’s (2003: 177) Bourdieuan analysis of production culture: “a complex network of relations between various institutions and agencies that have various kinds and degrees of power over aspects of media production”, which involves “an ongoing construction of social actors working in it.” Of particular interest to us has been the role of authorship and its ownership amongst various actors, and the manner in which audiences are permitted to participate in decision making and to which extent this participation is only token or pseudo-participation (Carpentier, 2007). Participation here can arise from an actor’s membership of various communities. 1 Thus, we were also interested in how audience engagement is envisaged within the field of production, the composition of that audience and how it participates in constructing the museum’s narratives. We had in mind van Mensch (2005) assertion

that museums need to be laboratories and meeting points for discussion and new initiatives. In Estonia recently released from the shackles of the Soviet system this was for many a very novel conceptualisation of the museum.

1. Authoring the nation

The location of the original museum building became historically significant to Estonians for many reasons. Raadi Manor (Figure 1), on the outskirts of Tartu, the second largest town in Estonia, prospered under the Baltic-Germans in the nineteenth century and enabled the owner to develop his interest in flying. This resulted in the establishment of a small airfield, which decades later made the area militarily attractive, and which would place an important role in the future conceptualisation of the museum. During the nationalist reforms of the early years of independence in the early twentieth century, the manor was given over to the University of Tartu, which agreed to share part of it with the Estonian National Museum. The manor was given over to the Estonian National Museum, which was actively seeking a building of its own at that time. The museum situated itself in the less than ideal main building, where a popular permanent ethnographic exhibition focusing on peasant culture opened in the early 1920s. The manor’s extensive grounds became a favourite spot for excursions and walks, and with its museum established Raadi as an important symbolic place for the whole of Estonia. How-

Figure 1: Raadi Manor, 1938. Photo: Eduard Selleke, Estonian National Museum
ever, the outbreak of the Second World War saw the evacuation of the collections and Soviet bombing of Nazi troops quartered there, left the building in ruins and the whole area in the hands of the Soviet air force.

For Estonians, this military and destructive influence on the Raadi area, which turned Tartu into a closed city, was a poignant metaphor for the overall situation Estonia had found itself in during the fifty years of Soviet rule. In April 1988, at the beginning of the public movement against the Soviet occupation, a demonstration was held calling for the Estonian National Museum to be returned to Raadi. The following year, the Soviet army made a partial withdrawal from the property and land was appropriated for the ‘Estonian National Museum at Raadi’.

From 1993 to 2005, discussion of the future location of a more permanent museum building revealed no consensus even within the museum itself. For many Raadi was in all senses a ruin: polluted both physically and symbolically.

In 1994, early in the transition period, an exhibition on Estonian culture was established in a temporary building at the centre of the town. The exhibition, in keeping with the dominant sentiment of the day, was deliberately ethno-romantic with its focus in the display of nineteenth-century peasant life. The curator responsible for the exhibition reflected a decade later that the role of the Estonian National Museum was to maintain Estonian identity, and its task was to find different ways to accomplish this objective.²

The Raadi area was not entirely forgotten though and a competition for future development of the manor was arranged. The resulting ideas were as diverse as the museum of the Baltic German culture, the museum of Estonian life histories and a multifunctional cultural centre. In 1998, the central manor area was returned to the museum by order of the Tartu city government but by then there existed plans to erect a new museum building in centre of the city. An architectural competition was held for the Estonian architects, which resulted in choosing a winning project and preparing the building site. However, delays in the construction work and a pressing need for space,³ led to the museum building its stores at Raadi, beginning the work in 2000. Building the storages at the Raadi certainly facilitated turning the opinion in favour of building the new museum at Raadi slightly later, following a number of newspaper articles published between 2001 and 2004, which reawakened a nostalgic reflection on that special place in the minds of an older generation of Estonians: “From now on, the museum’s Raadi-era started, the re-

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² This point was made in round table discussions in 2006 about the different exhibitions in Estonian museums.

³ The museum needed to remove its collections from temporary storages in different churches at Tartu and return the buildings to the congregations, as the buildings were leased/rented until 2005.
membering of which brings a sparkle in the eye of the older generation”. In the national newspapers, the new museum became a symbolic object of national importance, and the Estonian government’s decision at 2003 to rebuild the museum in the Raadi area was interpreted as a triumph of justice. The museum now became the material, bodily manifestation of the nation:

The return of the Estonian National Museum to Raadi is also the return to the home of the nation, which should give us certainty of our national cultural survival. There is no future without the past for a nation, let us take care of the past.

In 2005, an international architecture competition was announced. Estonian historian, Marek Tamm (2005), described the Estonian National Museum as ‘one of the most important displays of Estonian culture’, but emphasized in the introductory text to the competition that the museum’s identity was bound to change:

It is clear that today the golden age of nationalism is now behind us, and that a museum dedicated to displaying objects from a single nationality (and other Finno-Ugric nations) does not fit in with the terrain of other European museums. The ENM’s future should be, before all else, to operate as an ethnological museum with an open spirit and a diverse collection, which will gather, store, research, and display different cultural inheritances, not so much on a national as a scientific basis. But also, the ENM should preserve the knowledge of its historical role in the creation of the Estonian nation and through its collection investigate and display this role.

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5 After the thorough discussions in the councils for museums, architecture and heritage protection, the councils decided that the Raadi area is the most promising one in terms of the possible future developments of the museum and they decided to support the erection of the new museum building over there. At July 31st, 2003, the ministry of culture confirmed the decision.
7 The international, public architectural competition started at June 22th, 2005, organised jointly by the ministry of culture and the Estonian Architects Union.
9 Native English speakers should note that in continental Europe the term ‘scientific’ is not used in the same narrow and particular sense in which it is applied in the UK, USA and elsewhere. Here it refers to rigorous academic study and thus embraces such subjects as history without implying old-fashioned historiography or a narrowly ‘scientific’ conceptualisation.
The competition attracted Europe-wide interest and, quite unexpectedly, settled on a winning concept which positioned the museum building as extension to the runway on the airfield at Raadi. The concept, developed by three young architects from Paris, Dan Dorell, Lina Ghotmeth and Tsuyoshi Tane, titled “Memory Field”, completely ignored the common public understanding of the museum as the repository of the country’s romantic peasant past. Instead, the winning design attached itself to wider contemporary historical debate and something the media had not even considered when discussing the general vision for the museum. It had seemed unthinkable that the Soviet occupation could be part of the discourse on Estonian identity. The judging committee remarked:

The ideological premise behind this entry is somewhat unexpected and surprising given Estonia’s dramatic recent history – the devastating Soviet occupation lasting more than half a century. This history cannot and must not be banished from the nation’s memory by denying the traces still present; rather, these traces should be given a new meaning that inspires hope. This is a design that opens up discussions. (ENM 2006)

Dan Dorell, one of the architects of the design, said that their inspiration had come from Berlin where the Berlin Wall had been transformed from being a metaphor for Eastern Block repression into art that integrated history into the urban space giving it new meanings. Contemporary Berlin now had numerous objects and spaces that connected the city and nation to its recent history in the lived environment.

Andres Kurg, an Estonian architectural historian, saw in the new museum’s design a tension between ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ elements, as they might be termed in the collective memory of Estonians. He noted that for these Western European architects, the airfield signifies the polarity of the Cold War, rather than the occupation of Estonia: “For locals it also signifies pollution, confinement, Dzhokhar Dudayev or something else.” Kurg saw the airfield (Figure 2) as a scar left from a century of modernisation which was situated in the midst of

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10 The architects, originally from Italy, Lebanon and Japan, have later on established themselves as an architectural bureau „Dorell.Ghotmeth.Tane“ with an office in Paris.
12 Dzhokhar Dudayev (1944–1996) was the first president of Chechnya and before that a Major-General of Raadi air base in the last years of the Soviet Union. His actions during that period are seen to have favoured the Estonian nationalist movement over the Soviet authorities.
conflicts and their after effects but yet which were set to continue to shape the modern nation. He felt that collecting this history together and explaining it was very much a task for the future Estonian National Museum.

The architects understood that recent historical events evoked strong emotions in contemporary Estonians but their desire was to locate a physical and mental space which opened up modes of meaning-making beyond that of explicit condemnation and the eradication of all of residues of the Soviet past. It was seen as an important new role for the Estonian National Museum. The museum also had to recognise that it had entered an increasingly heterogeneous world, that it existed in a state now fully engaged in Europe and with global socio-cultural and intellectual trends. This, however, brought its own challenges, for Estonians also needed to restore and consolidate their own ethnically-based sense of nationhood; the world was open to them after 50 years of closure, but they still had work to do at home.

Not everyone saw the plan for the museum positively. Some felt it perpetuated the occupation and that the imposition of these connections on the very fabric of the national museum only served to humiliate and undermine Estonian identity.  

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The nation had developed strong online communities, and the Web soon became the hub for debates concerning the museum’s future. Here the tension between the popular image of the ethnographically-based museum – that secure monument to the romantic national era which underpinned a long-held national identity – and the winning project, relying as it did on controversial and negative symbols, produced considerable argument. This popular debate indicated that, while the project had its supports, the critical voices in the public opinion became most well heard. One commentator wrote, outraged at the architects’ suggestion that the project offered therapy for Estonians, ‘this Soviet airfield runway is symbolic suicide... Frustrating ignorance regarding the common cultural memory!!’ The idea seemed an imposition which ignored the public’s collective memory altogether. Several groups felt that the museum’s representations of the past should be a string of ‘beautiful events and secure symbols’, which ignored bloodier history. The airfield plan served to glorify the occupation and open up old wounds in a kind of ‘psychoanalysis’ of the past. Others thought such attitudes were akin to burying one’s head in the sand. The museum had already embarked capturing history in all its forms and circumstances:

Estonian cultural heritage, for the documentation and preservation of which the Estonian National Museum has been established, as far as I know, is a way more diverse phenomenon than Jakob Hurt and the Finno-Ugric. The museum is for example, actively collecting material from the Soviet period... If the ENM building adopted the calming and comforting mode of the barn swallow, it would mean that we would still be able to identify ourselves only with the secure self-image and the image of history. Which is unfortunately just an illusion.

16 Jakob Hurt (1839–1907), one of the central figures in the Estonian national awakening movement, initiated a massive folklore collecting campaign in 1888, thus paving the way for the collecting activities that led to the founding of the Estonian National Museum in 1909.
17 The barn swallow (hirundo rustica) was ‘appointed’ to the position of Estonian national bird in 1962, at the peak of socialist optimism in the Soviet Union when the authorities launched campaigns to invent national symbols. The barn swallow, like a few other national symbols of the Soviet era, has not lost its meaning, its silhouette today marking locally produced food products, for example.
The architectural competition had effectively disrupted the process of authorship which had begun with popular opinion and the reawakening of a nation seeking to connect to its pre-Second World War past. The successful architects saw the project in terms of prestige – giving Estonia a landmark cultural building that could sit beside those in other European nations. Naturally, these architects thought spatially and sought to highlight the spatial authorship over which they had control. Although they had no expertise as historians, curators or Estonians, they aimed to find a symbol to open a contested issue of the recent history of the nation and give the control back to the people through spatial means. For the general public, the restitution of the nation concerned issues of historical memory. Space was a subordinate matter. Debate in the media reflected the positions of both these parties, but it did not create debate between them or result in public participation. Between these two groups sat the museum’s curators who were primarily interested in the internal spaces of the museum and their authorship. For them, restitution was a point of observation rather than participation and their interests focused on the academic understanding of folk culture as an important underpinning of national identity.

2. Participation

What emerges as critical to the production of the new museum is this distinction between producer (author) and consumer (audience): in what ways, was the audience being engaged in the production process and did this constitute participation in the act of authorship? In early discussions, it appears that the public only had a voice in the various media and not in the project itself. This permitted this potential audience the role of commentator on a predetermined end product using their resources of historical memory and its fixed meanings and leisure consumption as a predesigned experience. The disappointment in the grand narrative of participation was itself a product of Estonia’s recent cultural transformation; the approach simply had not found a foothold or become established as a social norm (Kalmus et al., 2009; Runnel et al., 2009). Discussing such issues with the public would have been unthinkable in the Soviet period and the rebirth of cultural participation has been slow after the crisis in early nineties, after the mass movements of independence had met the harsh realities of new state. But even in the West, architects are known for their possession and control of landmark projects. The new Estonian museum had become, first and foremost, a piece of architecture (Figure 3).

In discussions between the architects and the jury, the audience remained a vaguely conceptualised entity. It was to be the target of meaning-making and strongly guided rather by the architectural idea than by audience study. The jury felt they were delivering what they considered, the audience needed, indeed what
the nation needed: something what could have been considered progressive and ‘trendy’. The member of the architectural jury Winy Maas stated:

As a museum of national heritage, displaying the life and culture of the nation in its temporal, spatial, and social diversity, it complements and at the same time competes with emerging pop culture as expressed through the media, fashion, travel and lifestyle. Therefore, the committee was looking for a design that would give the new museum an active role in the new global pop culture that transcends national boundaries, and that would also transform the rather passive, ‘dusty’ attitude towards the museum into an active, ‘hip’ presence, that would attract the younger generation and be functional and competitive in the international context.19

As this quote highlights, the audience was kept at a distance – socially and conceptually – and remained as abstractly and taxonomically conceived in this process of conceptualisation as in the architects’ and engineers’ plans for the museum’s public services and spatial logistics, which divided visitors up into general audience, those with special needs and those classified as children. In this preliminary

phase, meetings between engineers, museum employees and architects never involved discussion of the audience or its potential involvement and it never appeared as a topic on meeting agendas.

The Director of the Estonian National Museum, Krista Aru, expected the new museum to convey a story that “should not be a dull monologue, but a lively dialogue, inspiring participation, research, discourse and continued study. A dialogue that attracts people, sparks ideas and encourages new endeavours” (Aru, 2006: 9). These words indicate a desire for the museum to be open, inclusive and engaging but there is no indication of how such a dialogue would be produced. As in museum culture generally, this Estonian director had the power to shape the institutional outlook (Tali, Pierantoni, 2008b), but all such directors work within cultures possessing established professional outlooks and long-term careers which can be resistant to change.

Some of the museum’s curators and project managers certainly considered audience dialogue a new and challenging development. These curators retained an expert relationship with their audience which puts them in the position of authorship with regard to the museum’s various messages. Curatorial interaction with the public follows formats established in the early years of the museum: distributing questionnaires for the museum’s Network of Correspondents20 in order to collect ethnographic information; conducting ethnological fieldwork for research and preparing temporary exhibitions, etc. This kind of audience engagement, despite containing dialogical elements, regards people rather as sources of information and authenticity for the museum, while not leaving much space for active interpretation of the audiences or shared authorship.

Perception of the needs of the audience by those controlling the project were mainly based on what they had seen in museums around the world, together with their own particular consumption preferences and cultural tastes. Thus land use, politics and archaeology were deemed ‘boring’, while volunteer fire-fighters during the first period of independence and the gendered division of everyday life were seen as ‘sexy’, in terms of audience appeal. When dealing with audience-related matters, staff attention centred on target groups with whom the museum had long had contact. Family members of curatorial staff also appear in conversations and were used to represent the public more generally.

20 The correspondents’ network of the Estonian National Museum was founded in 1931 in order to collect extra data about the objects, collected to the museum. Today the correspondents’ network comprises about 700 contributors both from Estonia and abroad, answering the questionnaires regarding both modernity and the recent past. The collection of materials on the topics chosen by the correspondents also continues.
These passing references to the museum’s audience, however, did nothing to address the 55 per cent of people living in Estonia who had never heard of the Estonian National Museum. Among this number, the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia is disproportionately significant. The presence of other nationalities in Estonia was discussed with regard to the future museum but they were not been integrated into the project. The draft of the profitability and feasibility analyses of the future museum declared that future exhibition spaces would tell the story of non-Estonian groups, particularly Russian-speakers, for the first time in the nation’s history. The execution of this agenda for minority engagement seems an obvious moment to introduce shared authorship but it would need to overcome the established discourse of ethnic nationalism and the museum’s passive engagement with the audience. The ethnographic nature of the Estonian National Museum positioned the audience as a subject and source of information; its marketing efforts saw them only as notional ‘target-groups’. Perhaps for the museum to realize its potential, change was required not just internally but in the audience itself which had to learn to become active in civic and cultural participation.

3. Towards innovation and participation

The word ‘nation’ in the name of the Estonian National Museum indicates that this is an institution serving a living population and a living culture facing the turmoil of today while preparing itself for tomorrow. It is not a word that merely signals that it possesses the residues of earlier or vanished manifestations of the nation. It indicates that the museum has a role in opening up and supporting change, and particularly in addressing an Estonia that is multicultural and situated in a modern global environment. It is in the phase of production, that brings into being the new museum, that such reconfiguration can take place but in the case of the Estonian National Museum this phase has produced two quite separate discourses which have failed to communicate. One, popular, vernacular and traditional, is possessed by the public; the other, intellectual, academic and architecturally postmodern, is in the possession of professionals.

In its current form, the Estonian National Museum remains home to the first discourse: an explanatory, fixed view of history based on essentialist views of culture. Although developed by museum curators who researched their interpretations, the exhibition nevertheless communicates a commonsense discourse so

well established in Estonian society that one might consider it the national canon. It perceives culture as a bounded unity – something to be secured and protected, using the physical evidence of material objects – which helps express a wider distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’. In 1994, when the current exhibition was opened, this seemed the correct approach as the country had only recently regained independence and needed to rapidly recover its identity in a shared sense of belonging. As such it reflects popular conceptions of national culture which, dominated by cultural anxieties, sought security in a timeless romantic peasant past. If the museum was to reinvent itself with this discourse, it would remain centred on a depository for as one newspaper remarked, “where the treasury of the nation is located, is also its mentality”. This process of collection building would result in ritualised confirmation of (ethnic) nationhood and national identity. From the debate surrounding the new museum, it is clear that the Estonian public would consume such an exhibition as authentic.

The professionals involved in shaping the new museum, however, have become attached to a discourse which is intellectual, academic and postmodern (see, for example, Bhabha, 1994; Hann, 1994; Baumann, 1996). It favours negotiation and the collection becomes rather less central to the museum’s purpose. This vision privileges the museum as a particular kind of communication institution, a place that potentially enables changes in what we know and how we think about things, a place that influences attitudes and becomes a laboratory of value systems and identities.

The ethnology curators who are to create the new permanent exhibitions exist between the public and the leaders of the architectural and conceptual project for the museum as a whole. Because of the expectations of the general public, they will, however, be attached to some extent also in the future to a view of culture that is static, fixed, objective, consensual and uniformly shared by the majority of the (ethnic) community. This is seen, for example, in the folk art consultation centre, to be opened in the new building, which would draw its knowledge from the museum collections and give the public advice concerning the ‘rights and wrongs’ of how to wear ethnic dress, amongst other things.

The missing ingredient at the heart of these issues is the audience itself. Without dialogue during the preparation of the museum, a lot depends on guesswork – or rather, the preferences of those in control on the basis of their professional experience and greater exposure to museums as creative and evolving institutions. Of course, the team developing the museum may have genuine concerns that such consultation will result in compromise and the diminution of concept. The only

time the audience was more fully considered was during the writing of the EU application to secure funding for the new museum building. But even then the project-writing company undertaking this work were interested only in market targets and cost-benefit – the audience as numbers rather than people.

A dialogical national museum permitting shared authorship calls not only for the modernisation of the museum’s communication and consultation apparatus, it may also require a fundamental shift in the underlying concept of ‘Estonianness’. Without these changes the museum cannot be reinvented but rather would continue to perpetuate itself in its own values. Yet, audience awareness shows that this does not reflect the modern Estonian state, the realities of the past or the nation’s modern context. The key issue in the transformation process, or ‘reinvention’ of the Estonian National Museum, is whether the museum will be able to substitute or enrich ethnic nationalism with civic nationalism. This could be done by supporting and fostering participation; offering audiences an opportunity to engage in re-writing stories about the Estonian past. This would also enable the Estonian National Museum to broaden the default concept of Estonian identity. The role of the museum is, in this setting, to provide all audiences with thought-provoking materials rather than just comfort blankets. If the national museum is able to take on this active role in re-imagining the nation in this way, then rather than simply being a site of social memory, it can also be a place of cultural innovation and cohesion.

Acknowledgements

The publishing of this article was supported by the Estonian Science Foundation grant no 8006 and the Estonian Ministry of Education and Science target financing project no SF0180002s07.

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