

**Cities in Europe, Cities in the world - 12th International Conference on Urban History.
Portugal, Lisbon, 3-6 September 2014.**

**Session M50. Urban Design for Mussolini, Stalin, Salazar, Hitler and Franco During the
Interwar Period**

The Stalinisation of Estonian town planning: visions and heritage

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Last revision: February 12, 2015

Keywords: Town planning, Architecture, Design, Society

Abstract

Soviet Stalinist town planning seems anachronistic but paradoxically embodies harmony and effectiveness – as in Hitler-era Germany and Mussolini-era Italy. While tradition-based town planning most strongly appeared in the totalitarian states where strong ideologies were crystallised in grandiose and ensemble-like architectural and town planning memory carriers, new, yet paradoxically still old and functional, trends were quite similar in both authoritarian and democratic countries.

By comparing the independent Estonian town planning of the 1930s with that of the post-war Soviet period in the 1940s and 1950s it becomes clear that the Stalinist principles introduced by the Soviet occupation (since 1940) were rather similar to local ones and differed mainly in scale and execution. Paradoxically and despite the war damage and terrorism caused by the occupying Soviet regime Stalinist town planning principles generally matched with Estonian architects' city visions. Some existing towns (for instance Tallinn, Pärnu, Narva) got new centres due to war damage and on the other hand for ideological reasons. Meanwhile new industrial towns, as examples of Stalinist utopia, were built in East-Estonia during the 1940s and 50s in order to allow the Soviet regime to exploit local mineral resources. Compared to small independent Estonia, Soviet Union, encompassing a sixth of the whole planet, was a much bigger architectural subsidizer. Though suffering irrational demolitions (Narva, Pärnu) after World War II, Estonian towns got axially arranged representative, sometimes enormous, but fairly perspective and functional plans (Sillamäe, Kohtla-Järve).

Implications. There seem to exist quite effective examples of town planning that are solved with rather enterprising methods in Estonia. On the other hand such imperial town plans are quite challenging both to the local authorities and the state nowadays.

Introduction

Although the Stalinist principles that were brought to Estonia during the Soviet occupations of 1940 and 1944 seemed rather similar to local ones, in a couple of instances Estonian architects and town planners faced quite unexpected instructions from the occupying regime. After World War II Estonian architects were incrementally forced to abandon not only former city centres but also their projects to restore the wrecked centres of Narva and Pärnu and finally the traditional materials used in walls and on façades. As local architectural organisations including, for example, the Union of Estonian Architects were merged with the Soviet organisations Estonian urban architecture, design and planning were compelled to follow Soviet doctrine in concept, form and building materials. The most radical consequence of this meant the replacement of a city and its inhabitants. These new principles changed the doctrines of Estonian urbanism.

The meaning of town planning

Town planning and the urban space with which it deals may be taken somehow as a form of information communication technology. There one can recognise information recording functions (materialised ideology), communicational functions (massive, seemingly sole purpose, produced space) and procession functions (computing and again communicating ideology through material). The most ideological town planning seems to belong to the totalitarian political systems. Public architecture communicates with everyone, but especially through grandiose and ensemble-like buildings as examples of memory or ideology carriers. Thus public architecture and urban space has always been utilised by authoritarian and totalitarian systems in order to control citizens, their minds and memory. On the one hand town planning represents urbanism and its constituent visions, development, heritage and perspectives, but on the other hand it is also quite philosophical and even reflects the effectiveness of a society. Urban space as the quintessence of town planning, concerning especially the representative city centre, carries on the idea of the artefact, but also represents both contemporaneous ideology and functional needs (or predicted needs). Strictly organised, axial town planning, well known since Roman times and traceable through the Renaissance and later, the classicism of the twentieth century, is a rather functional model that organises a town along a gridline in order to make a state more effective and enterprising.

Similarly to that of totalitarian Italy and Germany, Soviet Stalinist town planning seems anachronistic but paradoxically embodies harmony, effectiveness and functionality. Both Nazi German and Soviet Stalinist architecture and town planning are rather similar and their differences exist mostly in details and sources.¹

Mussolini's Italy provides an even stronger example where a new stately and ideological term, *novecento* was derived from the renaissance cultural designations, *quattrocento* and *cinquecento*.² In Italy one can recognise building and planning patterns carried over in a more generalised and distilled way from the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and classicism albeit while still containing the essence of the source and being reminiscent of contemporary modernism as illustrated, for example, by Giuseppe Terragni's *Casa del Fascio* in Como (1932-1936).³

In Nazi Germany Albert Speer designed the Nuremburg Zeppelin field to be a stage for

¹ H. W. Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory: from Vitruvius to the Present*, London, Zwemmer; New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1994, p. 423

² K. Frampton, *Modern Architecture: a Critical history*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1989, p. 217

³ S. A. Kostof, *History of Architecture. Settings and Rituals*, NY/ Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1995, p. 718

ideological films and to exist for a thousand years. In order to reflect the power of Nazi ideology the complex was supposed to be immaterially larger in darkness while its lights were directed into the sky to create a “cathedral of light”.⁴ The recorded, crystallised information (materialised ideology) was communicated through the production of space, while computed and again communicated into ideology. The closed circle is reminiscence of Plato’s static state model.

On 15th June 1931 the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s Central Committee’s Plenum decided that town planning including both reconstruction and construction would be realised under the guidance of the state’s central plan for the national economy.⁵ In January 1932 the Soviet People’s Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharskiy stated that one task of architecture was to integrate functionality and utility into an ideological idea in a harmonised way.⁶ In February 1932 the Soviet Communist Party found a new ideological method – socialist realism. Partly reflecting René Descartes’s rationalist philosophy of method, socialist realism aimed to collect the best from both history and the contemporary period. The new method, one of the important cornerstones of Soviet ideology, was supposed to lead society into an ideal future. Socialist realism was not intended to give up the cultural heritage, but to recycle and synthesise it on the behalf of a better tomorrow. Meanwhile socialist realism handled the cultural and architectural heritage as a storeroom, from where one might take whatever one wants, whenever one wants. This method was supposed to “embody an absolute apocalyptic future where the difference between past and future abolishes significance.”⁷

An indication of the state’s increasing enterprising role was the decision of the Palace of the Soviets Construction Council made under the guidance of Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars Vyacheslav Molotov on 28th February 1932: according to the Palace of Soviets competition prescriptions all architects were compelled to follow requirements of simplicity, unity and elegance in architecture and to follow the best example of classicist architecture in one’s creation.⁸ In December 1931 explosives were used to demolish the Moscow Saviour Church was in order to make space for the Palace of the Soviets.

Meanwhile the state architect of Germany [*Erster Baumeister*] Paul Ludwig Troost redesigned Munich’s central square, *Köningsplatz*, in the early 1930s according to Leo von Klenze’s *propylea* and Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s classicist principles. The newly designed *place royale* seemed to suit the Third *Reich* to the extent that Adolf Hitler characterised its composition as an incarnation of *Germanische Tektonik* that expressed “the German nation’s mighty, uncompromising architectural heritage” and its “blood relationship with Hellenes.”⁹

Parallel with the redesign of Moscow’s central structure, the first Stately Union Congress of Soviet Architects, held between 16th and 26th June 1937, stated in its resolution that the principle method of Soviet architecture was to be socialist realism. According to the new method soviet architects were supposed to be able to produce, in the most rapid and industrialised way, architecture that was highly qualified both aesthetically and

⁴ W. J. G. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, London: Phaidon, 1996, p. 355

⁵ А. В. Бунин, *Градостроительство*. М, Издательство Академии Архитектуры СССР, 1945, с. 290, 291

⁶ Ю.Л. Косенкова, *Советский город 1940-х – первой половины 1950-х годов. От творческих поисков к практике строительства*. Изд. 2-е, доп., М., Книжный дом “ЛИБРОКОМ”, 2009, с. 19-20

⁷ В. Groys, “Stalin-stiil”, *Akadeemia*, Tallinn, Tallinna Raamatutrükikoda, nr. 3, 1998, lk. 641-644, В. Groys, “Stalin-stiil”, *Akadeemia*, Tallinn, Tallinna Raamatutrükikoda, nr. 4, 1998, lk. 859

⁸ М. П. Цапенко, *О реалистических основах Советской архитектуры*, М., Государственное издательство литературы по строительству и архитектуре, 1952, с. 73

⁹ G. Troost, *Das Bauen im neuen Reich*, Bd. 1, Bayreuth, Gauerlag Bayreuth, 1938, s. 15, 16

economically.¹⁰

As stated by the Soviet architect Ivan Zholtovskiy, architecture in urban space was supposed to be ensemble-like, whereby every house had to be ruled by the ensemble. That meant a certain hierarchy where every part had to obey the principle of unity.¹¹ In this way a method for producing an artistic image that hoped to educate and re-educate the masses was created through a synthesis of the arts – the bringing together of different forms of art under one architectural ‘roof’.¹²

Traditional architecture and town planning was not as industrialised as modernism. It was more comprehensible, a reminder of the “good old times”, and thus provided the opportunity to pull people in. This interactivity, the method of recycling and synthesising on the behalf of a better tomorrow allowed Soviet ideology to be materialised, for example, in the town planning that had a great impact on the lives of citizens.¹³ The Soviet Union used town planning as a recording technology that was supposed to communicate the ideology in order to be processed, computed and spread all over the Earth.

Strict gridline – anachronistic crystallisation or perspective functional need?

Organised public space as part of town planning and the axial and strict gridlines of towns are first of all functional and only later totalitarian. Such town planning seemed to embody peace, harmony and effectiveness.¹⁴

At the same time it seemed to embody an enterprising state that hoped to solve all social problems as effectively as possible. For instance in the Soviet Union the main principle of soviet town planning was the Stalinist concern for the people as illustrated by Moscow, which “by its 800th anniversary received a new architectural appearance: axial town planning, well equipped living quarters, parks, bridges and grandiose administrative buildings completed in accordance with the general plan for the city’s reconstruction.”¹⁵

Nevertheless town planning as a projection of the state is reflected both in Plato’s pyramid-shaped state model and Aristotle’s dynamic state model. Plato’s model was static depicting an eternally crystallised ideology that in turn was to be circulated within the state. Aristotle’s model introduced social effectiveness: the less democratic the state is, the more effective or in other words, enterprising it seems to be. Town planning seems to indicate the state’s social effectiveness.

While in Western countries, the replacement of modernism by a new classicist movement meant that democracy had been replaced by totalitarian systems, in the Soviet Union all architectural development took place against the background of a totalitarian system. In town

¹⁰ М. П. Цапенко, *О реалистических основах Советской архитектуры*, М., Государственное издательство литературы по строительству и архитектуре, 1952, с. 74, 75

¹¹ И. В. Жолтовский, “Ансамбль в архитектуре”, *Строительная газета*, 1940, 30.05

¹² K. Kodres, “Sovietization of classical architecture: the case of Estonia”, *Quo vadis architectura?: Architectural tendencies in the late 1930s, 1940s, and the early 1950s*, Helsinki, University of Technology, 2008, p. 142

¹³ A. Åman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era. An Aspect of Cold War History*. NY, The Architectural Foundation, Inc., 1992, pp. 53-55

¹⁴ For instance James McMillan plan in Washington D.C., 1902

¹⁵ *Советская архитектура за XXX лет РСФСР*, М., Издательство Академии Архитектуры СССР, 1950, с. 8, 9

planning totalitarian systems very much favoured nationalistic urban ensembles that enabled the leadership to materialise state ideology, to orient the crowds as much as possible towards squares that functioned like theatre stages, and to manipulate the crowds and convince them that the state really was powerful, as well as to let them believe at the same time that all this power belonged to the people.

Similar to global tendencies, architecture in the independent Republic of Estonia in the 1930s started to focus on nationalistic urban ensembles as an architectural element enabling the young country to develop its own national façade. This tendency increased as Estonia became more authoritarian.



The Pärnu Road apartment buildings that are located near to Freedom Square in Tallinn and date to the late 1930s. (The author).

The Republic of Estonia was interested in inscribing its state's representative façade in urban space through town planning. In order to achieve this the redesign of the central city spaces of Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu along with those of other towns was planned. According to president Konstantin Päts's decree of 27th May 1936 all façades in Tallinn's Freedom Square district could be designed or redesigned with permission of the president only and all buildings close to the Freedom Square, given its representative appearance, could only be demolished by the government's order.¹⁶

By comparing the independent Estonian town planning of the 1930s with that of the Soviet period in the 1940s and 1950s it becomes clear that the Stalinist principles introduced by the Soviet occupation were rather aesthetically similar to local ones and differed mainly in scale and execution.

Paradoxically and despite the wreckage of war and the terrorism of the occupying Soviet regime, Stalinist town planning principles generally matched the city visions of Estonian architects. It is common to characterise the Estonian town planning principles of the Soviet period as megalomaniac. For example, during the Tallinn Freedom Square architectural

¹⁶ "Vabadussõja üleriikliku mälestusmonumendi püstitamise seadus", *Riigi Teataja*, nr. 47, art. 371, 1936, lk. 1028

contest of 1937 Harald Arman and Salme Vahter-Liiver's proposal suggested doubling the area of the square by demolishing St John's church and a nearby school building.

Although the jury considered Harald Arman's and Salme Vahter-Liiver's proposal to be too enormous they still decided to purchase the project¹⁷ and in fact the contest specifications suggested the demolition of the church.¹⁸

In 1939 the construction of a new business and transport centre, also designed by Harald Arman, was started in the storehouses area of one of Tallinn's outlying suburbs.¹⁹ At the same time the construction of the new institutional ensemble (designed by Harald Sultson) commenced in centre of Tartu around the city's University.²⁰ Due to Soviet occupation and World War II neither of these plans were completed.

It is paradoxical that Stalinist urban ensembles in Estonia provided an opportunity for architects to carry out some of their architectural plans from the period of independence that had until that time existed only on paper. Furthermore compared to the small independent Estonia, the Soviet Union, encompassing a sixth of the whole planet, proved to be a much bigger subsidiser of these plans. In the 1940s private property had been abolished, resulting in the complete state ownership of the land. In addition, the war had destroyed huge areas of buildings that subsequently became 'playgrounds' for architects in Tallinn, Pärnu, Narva and elsewhere in Estonia.

During World War II according to a plenary resolution of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR) architectural union preparations were laid to ensure that soviet architects were ready for the gigantic restoration works needed after the war.²¹ The following instructions given by the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Soviet Communist Party compelled architects to design and restore wrecked towns in a more *grandiose* fashion and according to the state's ideology.²² As the head of the Department of Architecture of the **Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR)** Harald Arman already started organising the restoration of Estonian towns while he was residing in the USSR in mid-1944.²³

Meanwhile, the head of the State Committee of Architecture of the USSR, Arkadi Mordvinov, formulated the principles of Soviet post-war town planning that were compulsory for all architects.²⁴ On the one hand in the mid-1940s Estonian town planning was quite similar to the pre-war independence period and disregarded the rest of the architecture of the Soviet Union. For example, architect Ernst Ederberg tried to restore the old baroque centre of Narva and architect Endel Arman carried out a restoration project for Pärnu.²⁵ Both of the towns

¹⁷ ERA 2218.1.223, 34; "Vabadusväljak arhitektide kujutuses", *Vaba Maa*, 1937, 23.02

¹⁸ K. Bölaw, "Tallinna Vabadusväljaku ruumilise kujundamise projektide võistlus", *Tehnika Ajakiri*, nr. 4, 1937, lk. 86–87

¹⁹ ERA 3799.1.33, 3

²⁰ EAA 2100.6.163

²¹ "Пленум правления Союза архитекторов", *Правда*, 1943, 19.08

²² *Из истории советской архитектуры 1941-1945 гг. Документы и материалы. Хроника военных лет. Архитектурная печать*. М., Издательство "Наука", 1978, с. 94–102, 109

²³ И. Горич, "В мастерской зодчего", *Советская Эстония*, No. 187, 1946, 10.08, с. 4

²⁴ Ю.Л. Косенкова, *Советский город 1940-х – первой половины 1950-х годов. От творческих поисков к практике строительства*. Изд. 2-е, доп., М., Книжный дом "ЛИБРОКОМ", 2009, с. 42

²⁵ ERA R-1992.2.33, 88–92; E. Ederberg, "Narva vanalinna ülesehitamise probleem", *ENSV Arhitektide Almanahh 1947*, Tartu, Teaduslik Kirjandus, 1948, lk. 60-65; L. Volkov, "Eesti Arhitektuurist aastail 1940–1954", *Linnaehitus ja Arhitektuur*, Tallinn, Ehituse Teadusliku Uurimise Instituut, 1991, lk. 192; E. Parek, *Pärnu sajandeis. Ehituskunstiline ülevaade*, Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1971, lk. 72

were in a fair condition after World War II.



The Estonia Boulevard administrative buildings in Tallinn that date to the turn of 1940s and 1950s. The urban spatial design was created by Harald Arman and the foregrounded building by Enn Kaar. (The author).

On the other hand some architects (for example, Voldemar Meigas and Otto Keppe) proposed to restore Tallinn's centre in a way similarly to the Stalinist restoration of Leningrad (now named St. Petersburg). Harald Arman balanced between these two tendencies. Meanwhile, the East Estonian industrial towns of Sillamäe, Kohtla-Järve and Jõhvi and from the late 1940s Narva were designed following the guidance of Leningrad construction departments.

Nevertheless in the 1940s local Estonian architects designed administrative and apartment buildings in the manner of the 1930s. They used granite wall coating, modest, scarce ornament, and only increased the pitching of roofs slightly while adding some soviet symbols. For example, the Tallinn Cultural Centre in front of the Estonia theatre was designed under the guidance of Harald Arman in this way. Harald Arman gave local architects clear instructions for town planning in Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. These followed the board resolution of the Soviet Architect's Union of the USSR made on 24th October 1946 and the plenary resolution of the Soviet Architect's Union of the USSR made on 2nd August 1947.²⁶

So-called liberal Stalinism ended in 1949 and approximately 20,000 inhabitants of Estonia were deported to Siberia within one night. Political pressure radiating from Moscow compelled local Estonian architects to design urban space in a style more similarly to Moscow, the capital of USSR, Leningrad (now named St. Petersburg) and Stalingrad (now

²⁶ V. Meigas, "Eesti NSV arhitektide loomingulised ülesanded", *ENSV Arhitektide Almanahh 1947*. Tartu, Teaduslik Kirjandus, 1948, lk. 5 – 7; H. Arman, "Linnade planeerimise küsimusi ENSV-s", *ENSV arhitektide almanahh 1946*, Tartu, Teaduslik Kirjandus, 1946, lk. 5,7

Творческие задачи советских архитекторов в пятилетнем плане восстановления и развития народного хозяйства. Материалы XII пленума Союза советских архитекторов СССР, М., Государственное издательство архитектуры и градостроительства, 1948, с. 49–61

H. Arman, "Detailplaneerimise küsimusi", *ENSV Arhitektide Almanahh 1947*, Tartu: Teaduslik Kirjandus, 1948, lk. 10, 11

named Volgograd).



Apartment buildings at the corner of the Kauka and Lembitu streets in Tallinn that date to the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. (The author).

Perhaps one of the most Estonian enterprising town planning exercises, aside from Narva, took place in Pärnu during the Stalinist era. In 1947 and 1948 Endel Arman's restoration project for Pärnu was accepted by the Department of Architecture of the Estonian SSR.²⁷ At the same time, however, this project ignored the advice made by the consultant for the Estonian SSR of the Soviet Academy of Architecture, Igor Fomin, who proposed certain changes.²⁸ By the end of 1949 and the beginning of 1950 the Department of Architecture of the Estonian SSR routinely accepted the consultant's proposals²⁹. According to the board resolution of the Soviet Architect's Union of the USSR made on 5th June 1952 certain instructions in the field of ensemble-like town planning such as those followed for Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad (Volgograd), Kiev and Minsk – in other words the USSR's model towns – were to serve as examples for other towns all over the rest of the USSR's territory.³⁰

In the summer of 1952 Harald Arman himself proposed (with Grigory Schumovski and Mart Port) a project for Pärnu. The partly realised town planning project followed Igor Fomin's suggestions. According to the project many quarters of the burnt but still preserved old town were demolished and the St Nicholas Church, which dated to the fourteenth century and lay in a similar condition, was blown-up. The central square of the 1930s was abandoned and the demolished quarters of the old town were replaced with an enormous new axial centre. Meanwhile, the importance of Pärnu increased due to Moscow's decision to replace Estonia's traditional counties with Soviet oblasts.³¹

²⁷ ERA R-1992.2.1, 45-48

ERA R-1992.2.33, 74-84

²⁸ ERA R-1992.2.33, 139-142

²⁹ ERA R-1992.2.33, 104-126

³⁰ "Хроника. XIV пленум Правления Союза советских архитекторов", *Архитектура СССР*, No. 7, 1952, с. 31-33

³¹ ERA R-1992.2.70, 47; ERA R-1992.2.33, 42-44; E. Parek, *Pärnu sajandeis. Ehituskunstiline ülevaade*, Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1971, lk. 42,43; Г. Шумовский, "Будущее города-курорта", *Советская Эстония*, No.



The Pärnu oblast centre as it is today and as originally designed by Harald Arman between 1952-1955. (The author).

Since Pärnu was regarded as a future oblast capital it received a rather grandiose central square. While the soviet architect's handbook³² recommended a 1 hectare central square for towns with a population of 50,000, Pärnu, with a population of 20,000, received a 2.5 hectares central square.³³ Similar anomalies between town populations and the area of a town's centre could be noticed in Sillamäe and Kohtla-Järve whose centres were designed following the guidance of the Lengorstroyproyekt **architectural bureau** that resided in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg).

Conclusions

Stalinist architectural and town planning policy as doctrine and paradigm were rather enterprisingly framed by resolutions and instructions. Town planning provided the totalitarian system an opportunity to 'correct' collective memory: to remove 'the wrong' and to replace it with 'the right'. In order to control the memory of something the reincarnation of traditions is supposed to be replaced with another embodying new ideology thereby establishing a heritage for the future. Urban space as the quintessence of town planning, concerning especially the representative city centre and architectural system gives the state perhaps one of the best opportunities to 'correct' collective memory. At the same time the state seemingly should act in an utmost and resolutely enterprising way. Paradoxically, the above-mentioned similarities to the Stalinist architectural doctrine were ended after Stalin's death (1953) with the November 1955 resolution of the Communist Party of Soviet Union Central Committee that curtailed the use of exaggeration in architecture.³⁴

97, 1953, 14.01, c. 3; P. Härmsön, "Pärnu keskuse planeerimiskava kujunemine", *Ehitus ja Arhitektuur*, nr. 3, 1983, lk. 35–43

³² *Краткий справочник архитектора*, М., Государственное издательство литературы по строительству и архитектуре, 1952, с. 20, 21

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Об устранении излишеств в проектировании и строительстве. Постановление Центрального Комитета КПСС и Совета Министров СССР 4 ноября 1955 года*, М., Госполитиздат, 1955, с. 8, 11, 13, 15

On the one hand after World War II Estonian towns suffered irrational demolitions (as witnessed for example in Narva and Pärnu), on the other hand they received axially arranged representative, but functional plans (as in Tallinn, Pärnu, Sillamäe and Kohtla-Järve). For example, East Estonian industrial towns (like Sillamäe, Kohtla-Järve, Jõhvi and Narva) received axially arranged representative, sometimes enormous, but fairly proportional plans.



The Stalinist centre of Sillamäe that dates to the early 1950s (Lengorstroyproyekt) (The author).

Those town plans and state urban ensembles retain their processional functions even today. Both the ideology of the ceased state and the local visions of ideal cities are recorded in the completed town plans that have become memory carriers as heritage.



The Stalinist centre of Kohtla-Järve that dates to the early 1950s (Lengorstroyproyekt) (The author).



The Stalinist centre of Kohtla-Järve that dates to the early 1950s (Lengorstroyproyekt) (The author).

What to do with an urban heritage that consists of sometimes enormous, but still functional town plans? For example due to their strict and functional grid pattern Sillamäe and Kohtla-Järve have the potential to become both socially and economically prosperous cities at the border of the European Union.



Vassily Gerassimov Culture Palace in Narva, 1950-1957 (Konstantin Bortashevich) (The author).

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