



Logo of the course "Baltic Lab"  
Image by Jörg Schröder

## BALTIC LAB: creative platform on cities and territories in the Baltic States

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The construction of BALTIC LAB as an education and research exploration into places, topics, dynamics, and actors of urban change in the three Baltic States Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is based on a methodology developed in the last years, starting from the projects FRINGES (Schröder, Scaffidi, 2019) and MOUNTAINS (Schröder, Diesch, 2021). The interaction of creative research with new forms of teaching and learning in Master studio projects, enriched with interaction with local experts and stakeholders, has been extended through digital and hybrid tools, particularly with the NEW BAUHAUS CITY project (Schröder, Cappeller, 2021). What we now coin as "creative platform" is a format to innovate linkages between design research (Luce et al. 2022) in architecture and urbanism—combining approaches of research on, for and through design in an urban and territorial dimension—and challenge-based, site-specific, and learning-by-doing education in urban design and planning (Schröder, Cappeller, Diesch, Scaffidi 2023). The impulse of New European Bauhaus to target sustainability, inclusion, and aesthetics in a creative move towards a deep cultural change how we deal with and project cities and built environment strongly depends on an urban and local perspective (Schröder 2020a). In the "creative platform", projective examination as tool of cognition (Viganò 2010) are organised in a multi-place approach, the platform organises the dialogue between several case studies in a coherent methodological setup. Interaction with interdisciplinary experts and local stakeholders provides transdisciplinary perspectives and discussion about impact for urban transformation (Schröder 2022), and addresses the topics of open science and citizen science—beyond their important role in the education of future

architects and urban planners, for decisive skills in communication, holistic understanding, taking positions, becoming actors of a cultural change. Thus, BALTIC LAB aims not only at novel insights and enriched knowledge on cities and towns, but also on methodological innovation, in particular asking for a new role and definition of design and of research in urban and territorial dimensions, bound to the step from linear research and design processes to dynamic and combined feedback loops and the integration of invention, production, and performance of urban elements, advocated as new paradigm of "Circular Design" (Schröder, Cappeller, Diesch, Scaffidi, 2023).

Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, the capitals of the three Baltic States, have a long tradition as vibrant places for culture, economy (Aberg, Peterson 1998; Palmer 2007; North 2015), and today also for politics. Digital innovation, cultural creativity, open and independent thinking are enhancing communities, projects, and networks in the region and in Europe (Kljavin, Kurik 2016; Berzinš et al. 2016; Ušca, Benke, 2021; Alver et al. 2022). BALTIC LAB, aims to ask for the role of architecture and urbanism for sustainable development in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Curiosity is directed to the three metropolises, their perspectives and their interaction—and to the interaction with the territory of metropolitan margins, seaside, and inland towns and villages in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The approach of BALTIC LAB is to explore and test creative analysis and design thinking in order to contribute to facing current challenges: how can urban design and planning support to reach climate-neutrality and energy-independency? how can urban regeneration, urban transformation, and the energy-efficient

renovation in particular of housing stock become part of urban visions for liveable, innovative and inclusive places? how can the shift to sustainable mobility boost urban qualities, in particular linked to the Rail Baltica project and its opportunities for urban development? how can a territorial perspective establish compactness, mix, and proximity as climate-neutrality paradigms not only in the metropolises but also beyond?

In a trans-scalar perspective from urban design and planning, territorial innovation, and architecture, conceptual narratives (Schröder 2020) in analysis and project development have been conceptualised, tested, and critically discussed, opening up new sources of knowledge and possible components for shared transformation processes. In this sense, the 8 case study explorations merge analytical and synthetic aspects in a stream of creative inventiveness. They show how cities and towns in the Baltic States are spaces of flows, new linkages, dynamics, and critical perspectives; and they offer scenarios for transformation to sustainability: for the activation of public and common spaces and buildings in the mass-housing quarter Lasmanāe in Tallinn/Estonia; for a new role of the area around Linnahall in the city Tallinn/Estonia; for a creative network of several towns in northern Estonia in a productive city perspective, re-using abandoned spaces; for the role of cultural institutions for urban change in Viljandi/Estonia; for the discovery of the riverfront and the intensification of the university quarter in Riga/Latvia; perspectives due to the infrastructural project Rail Baltica for the station of Kaunas/Lithuania and on the surrounding quarter; and the opportunities of a new wood economy for urban development in Utena/Lithuania.

In its methodology, BALTIC LAB as research and teaching laboratory at the Chair for Territorial Design and Urban Planning of LUH, is combined with interaction with experts and innovators from the Baltic States for lectures, discussions, and workshops, starting from the conference BALTIC EXCHANGE until the on-site exploration in the BALTIC EXCURSION. Dialogue is at the core, between students, university researchers and teachers, architects, urban planners, artists, and creatives. The approach of BALTIC LAB is shared and developed as common platform of invention and experimentation: from an overview of topics, challenges, and dynamics to the selection of zoom and the set-up of mission for the investigative projects. In an analytical phase, the specific tasks of each zoom, in spatial, programmatic, and processual aspects, are clarified according to the specific context, initiatives, ideas, and processes in the places. The projectual phase extends the analytic range from territorial to urban and architectural scales towards strategy and intervention. For this analytical-conceptual approach, particular tools for analysis, design, and communication are developed in the common platform of the studio—mapping, diagramming, video, infographics, drawings, models. Overall, three innovations in urbanism are addressed in BALTIC LAB: new forms of trans-scalar urban and territorial projects, that are more strategic, more adaptive, more interactive, more linked to the architectural scale; new forms of mapping and graphics to grasp spatial potentials for a creative use towards the future, in the interaction of people with space; new forms of dialogue and exchange, crucial for transformation processes.

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