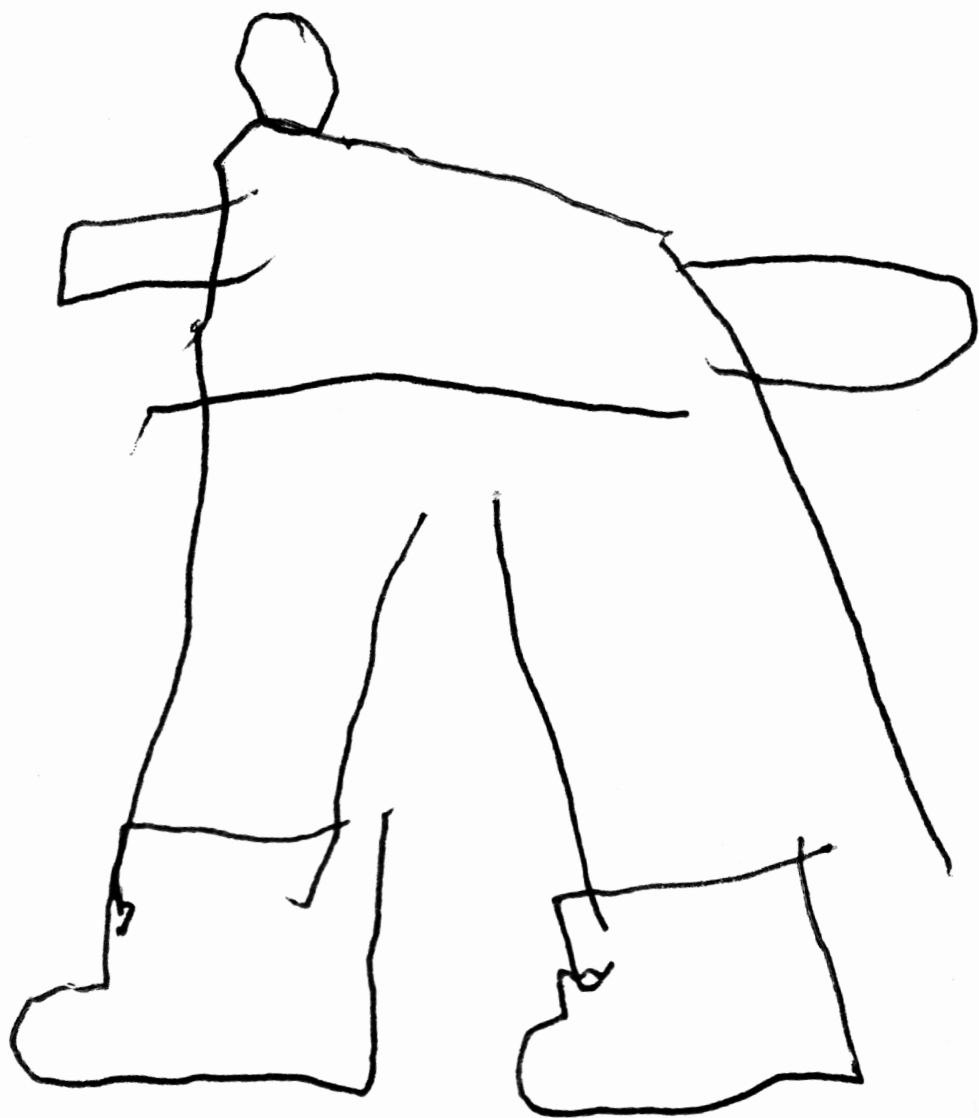




Theoretical Dissertation – Master of Architecture
École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne

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There is a twofold interest in the word *vide* that motivated choosing it as the title of this writing. Firstly, it is curiously unsettling. If one knows French, it rings rather hollow when written on a theoretical statement. Not giving away much, it makes one feel uneasy. It could be an abbreviation or a placeholder text – with the real meaning arriving shortly. However, sometimes emptiness is exactly that; it does not give anything more than is already there. One is left with a slight perplexion. Written in an *Excel* data sheet, the title may cause even more havoc for program looking for content and finding none – *vide* has an interesting quality of being somewhat of a modern rune.

Secondly, while it stands for an uneasy *emptiness* in French, in the author's native Latvian, it simply means *environment*, having a significantly more neutral tone. The coincidental play of meanings of the four-letter combination, amusingly, is a fitting comparison to describe the perception of emptiness in Latvia. With the population loss that has occurred in the country in the past 30 years, vacancy is so commonplace that it has become the background environment – no longer uncanny but rather the natural state of things. The following work places a focus on Rīga – the country's capital and by

far its largest urban setting – against this backdrop.

The theoretical statement commences with a description of the demographic developments in the county's most recent history. A short, zoomed-in quantitative analysis of the vacancy in the city follows. However, reaching a certain level of detail, the focus of the narrative is shifted rather to the qualitative aspects of idle space and the relationships the city's inhabitants have with it.

In a celebration of the complexity and subjectivity of a lived experience of a city, the remaining part of the work is structured around a walk in Rīga. The route passes by two abandoned buildings, some garages and a construction pit, all while telling a story of living beside vacancy and developing new attitudes towards it. The text is a balancing exercise of finding a midpoint between Rīga and writings placed far away from it. The midpoint appears to be another city – fictional but not farfetched enough to be impossible.

The narrative of the walk is supplemented by images made by the author, both in the form of photography and text. Throughout the chapters, a numbering points to the second volume containing references of spatial practices encountered during the research, which, like flower boxes on a windowsill, may not be entirely instrumental but do provide some joy and intricacy to one's day.

Figure 1
Total growth rate, birth rate, death rate and crude net migration rate per 1000 inhabitants in Latvia from 1950 to 2020.

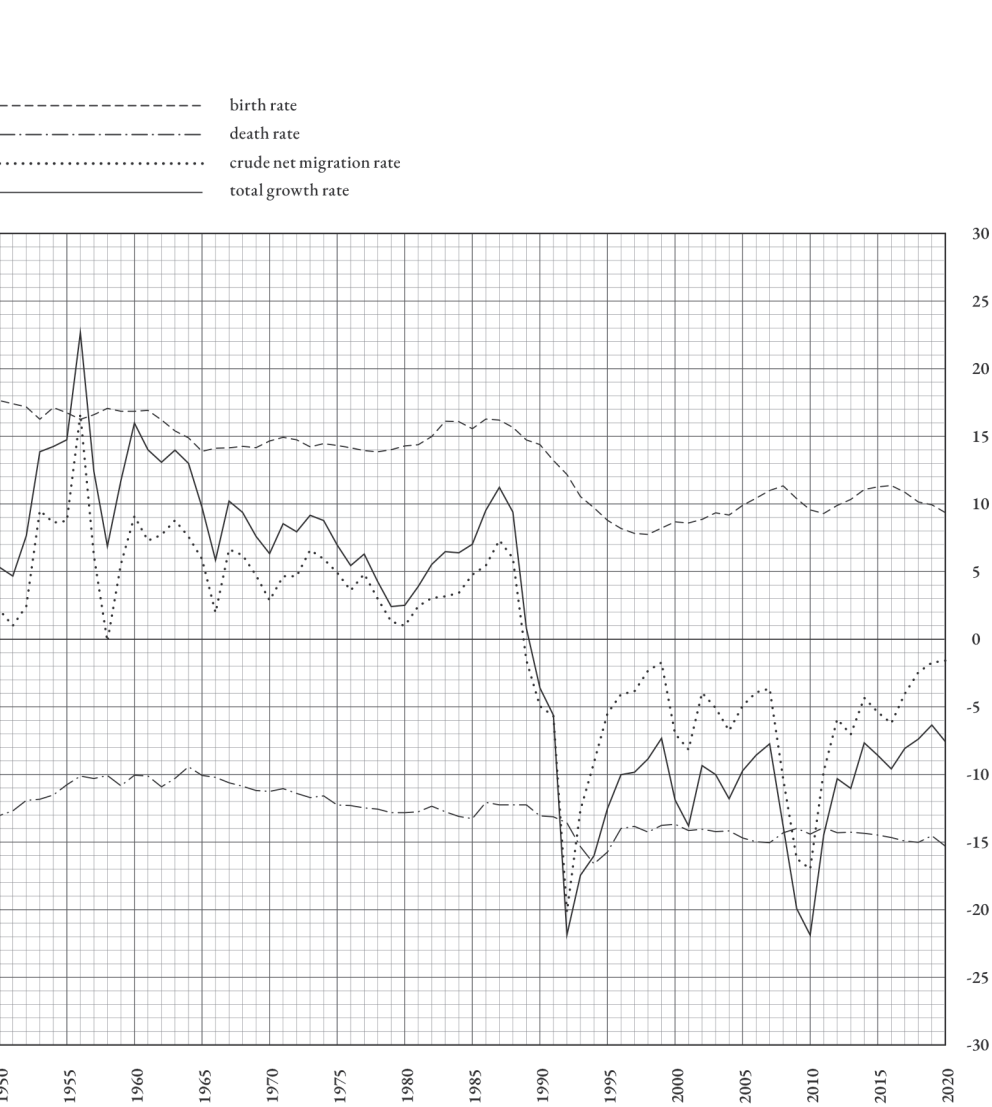


Figure 2
Population development of the capital cities of Northern Europe from 1950 to 2020.

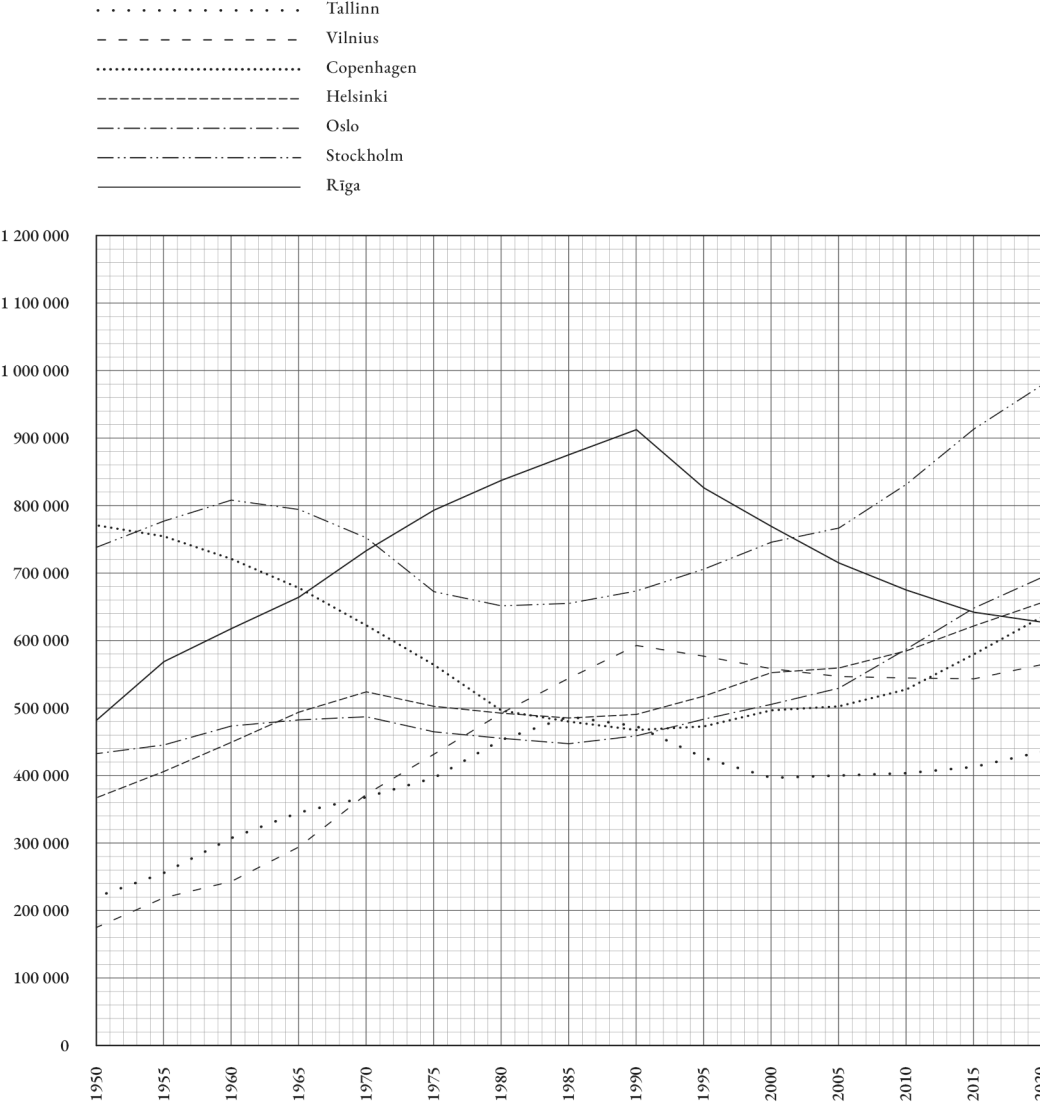
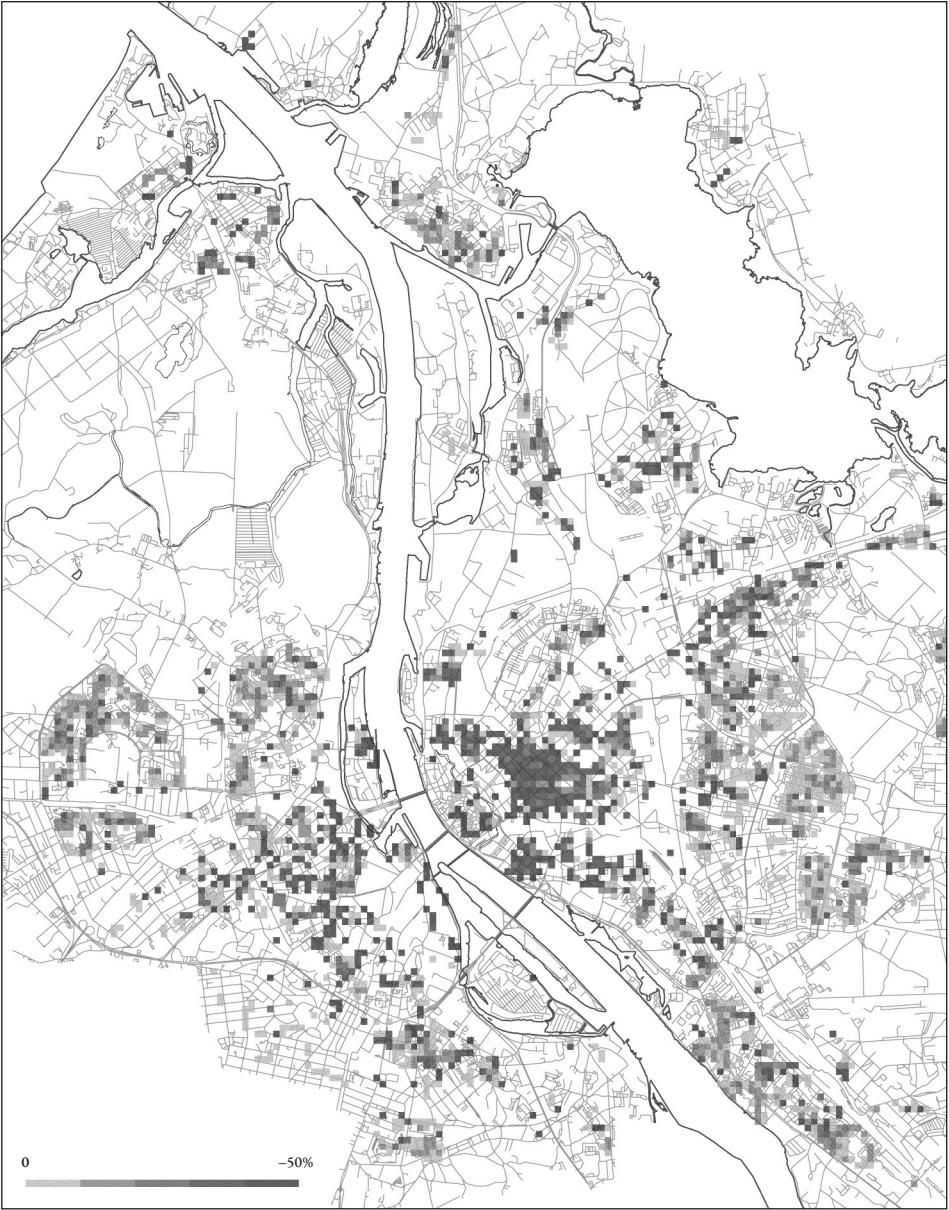


Figure 3
Map of Rīga with highlighted 100 x 100 meter grid coverage points where the number of permanent residents has diminished in the time period from 2000 to 2020.



Before the walk

See figure 1.

The combination of plotted birth rate, death rate, migration rate and the subsequent total growth rate is one of the simplest tools used in demography to describe the general developments in a set population over time. The rates can give an insight into the change in population from one year to the next, displaying births, deaths and migration proportionately against the general population number. Contrary to the discussion of just the change in total population numbers, this method provides a more nuanced look at its components and allows to observe minute yearly changes in population development trends imperceptible in the total population charts.

In the case of Latvia, the jagged teeth of the plotted graph of the past 50 years are an effective tool to describe the considerable changes in the political system, economy and freedom of movement that occurred in the territory, situated, both geographically and historically, in a foggy middle ground between the north and the east of Europe. The following passage is a compact, if not somewhat pragmatic, description of the country's most recent history that will provide a setting for the remaining writing.

Throughout the plotted timeframe, the territory of Latvia was in the fourth demographic transition stage. Therefore, the changes in birth and death rates can be described as more or less stable, especially when compared to the erratic fluctuations of the net migration rate, which most visibly affects the total growth rate. Consequently, this chapter primarily focuses on the migratory movement of the population.

The period from 1970 to 1991 shows a jagged but positive migration rate in the late decades of the USSR's dominion over the territory. The Latvian SSR, opposed to the

previously agrarian nature of the country, rapidly industrialised in a few decades and drew in a large workforce from other soviet territories.¹ In the fifty years after WWII, the population grew by about 700,000 inhabitants or 35%.²

Arriving in the early 1990s, the migration rate plunged sharply into negative values and has remained so for the following three decades. In 1991, Latvia regained independence from the USSR as a sovereign democratic state of 2,6 million inhabitants. As can already be gathered from the chart, this number has steadily declined ever since. After regaining independence, a number of the previously state-run industries ceased operation due to failure to transition from the USSR's planned economy to the new market economy in which the country found itself taking part. An exodus of workers travelling back to their sending SSR territories ensued.³ This movement is what best describes the sharp downward spike at the start of the 1990s. However, the independence from the USSR was also a significant turning point, as it enabled freedom of movement to Western countries previously prohibited by the socialist state, given that appropriate visas were secured.⁴ The freedom of movement to nearby countries with significantly more advanced economies has proved to be a persistent pull factor over the past thirty years, to the extent that the country's migration rate has remained a negative value ever since 1991.

The last notable spike in out-migration can be observed between 2008 and 2011. This coincides with the 2008 world financial crisis as well as Latvia's inclusion in the European Union's Schengen free movement area all in the same year. With Latvia being then one of Europe's worst affected territories by the crisis, access to the European labour market further incentivised migration to better-performing European countries.⁵

The toothed graph progression of the past 30 years

1. Zaiga Krišjāne and Maris Bērziņš, "Intra-Urban Residential Differentiation in the Post-Soviet City: The Case of Riga, Latvia," *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin* 63, no. 3 (October 13, 2014): 238.

2. "World Population Prospects 2022 – Total Population by Five-Year Age Group, Region, Subregion and Country, Annually for 1950-2100" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), accessed December 4, 2023, population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/.

3. Krišjāne and Bērziņš, "Intra-Urban Residential Differentiation in the Post-Soviet City," 245.

4. Anna Guhlich, *Migration and Social Pathways: Biographies of Highly Educated People Moving East-West-East in Europe*, (Opladen Berlin Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2017), 13.

5. Mihails Hazans, "Migration Experience of the Baltic Countries in the Context of Economic Crisis," in *Labor Migration, EU Enlargement, and the Great Recession*, ed. Martin Kahanec and Klaus F. Zimmermann (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2016), 298.

6. "World Population Prospects 2022."

See figure 2.

7. Philipp Oswalt and Tim Rieniets, *Atlas of Shrinking Cities* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 122, 146.

8. Māris Bērziņš and Zaiga Krišjāne, "Amenity Migration in Postsocialist Metropolis: The Case of Riga Agglomeration," *Proceedings of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Section B. Natural, Exact, and Applied Sciences*. 62, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2008), 73.

describes a de-population event during which Latvia has shrunk from 2,6 to 1,8 million inhabitants. That being a roughly 30% difference, the country not so proudly takes the first place in the EU for loss of inhabitants proportional to the total population in recent decades.⁶

The City

Concluding a compact description of Latvia's recent history in terms of population change, we turn more precisely to Rīga, the country's capital and the most populous urban area in the wider Baltic region.

Analogous to the population developments in the country, Rīga has experienced an equally impressive 30% population loss since the 1990s. When placed next to the other capitals in Northern Europe, Rīga sticks out as an outlier. On the contrary, one can easily categorise it as a "shrinking city" which have been observed and described in Europe since the early 2000s. Analogous to the situation discussed on a national level, the combination of liberated border policies and the closure of factories in the highly industrialised city were significant push factors for international emigration, placing Rīga as both a post-industrial and post-socialist shrinking city within the broader European discussion.⁷

An additional demographic development, unseen in the national-level charts, is a considerable movement from Rīga's urban settings to the adjoining rural areas. This local outflow has brought about the gargantuan agglomeration of Rīga, which, together with the city, houses 900,000 inhabitants or roughly half of the country's total population. The rapid suburbanisation event emerged almost simultaneously with the country's independence as the real-estate market replaced the socialist property allocation system.⁸

Considering the USSR living model of dense habitation in standardised housing blocks and communal apartments,

for many, the individual living space in the suburbs symbolised a break with the socialist past and a naively optimistic embrace of the neoliberal world. In the first decades of independence, prosperity seemed to stem from an individual rather than communal action, whose image was tarnished by the 50 years of Soviet rule. A suburban house was a story of luck and a prosperous career in the newly independent country.⁹ In accordance with the local *zeitgeist*, the early years of independence saw lax planning restrictions on suburban developments. Attitudes towards them have started to shift only recently, as the loss of tax revenues and the impossibility of infrastructure upkeep have become apparent.¹⁰

Numbers and Space

Thirty years on, the concurrent migration events have resulted in a significant emptying of the city. The current number of inhabitants is the same as in the 1960s. However, Rīga has since been built up to house some 300,000 more. One can not help but think of one of those weight loss before-and-after comparisons where smiling, thinner versions of the people have put on their old clothes – demonstrating an impressive gap between their hips and the enormous pair of trousers they used to wear. To link this entertaining image with the physical space in quantitative terms, the gap accounts for 15% of city dwellings labelled in official statistics as *uninhabited*. This share varies from district to district, reaching 35% or approximately 8,000 properties in the city centre and even higher proportions in some smaller districts such as Ķīpsala (50%) and Vecrīga (55%).¹¹

Although the macroscopic numbers of population decrease are known, it has to be admitted that further quantitative and spatial details on the resulting vacancy within the city become less precise. The previously

9. Matīss Groskaufmanis and Evelīna Ozola, *The Architecture of Together and Apart: An Inquiry into Apartment Buildings* (Rīga: New Theatre Institute of Latvia, 2018), 6.

10. Krišjāne, Bērziņš, “Amenity Migration,” 74.

See figure 3.

11. “Neapdzīvotu Tradicionālo Mājokļu Īpašvars Pilsētās [Proportion of Uninhabited Traditional Dwellings in Cities],” *Oficiālās statistikas portāls* [Portal for Official Statistics], accessed December 3, 2023, data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START/MAS070NOC/table/tableViewLayout1/.

12. “Par nekustamā īpašuma nodokli Rīgā [Real estate tax in Rīga],” *Legal Acts of the Republic of Latvia*, accessed December 4, 2023, likumi.lv/doc.php?id=275681.

13. “Par nekustamā īpašuma nodokli Rīgā [Real estate tax in Rīga].”

14. Ibid.

mentioned term *uninhabited* is used in official statistics to describe a property without registered inhabitants. In an attempt to counter vacancy as well as income tax outflow of the city, the municipality incentivises the registration of inhabitants by raising the property tax of *uninhabited* dwellings sevenfold.¹² However, one can imagine how the status of properties may differ from the actual situation. For instance, vacant apartments may have registered inhabitants to avoid the increased property tax. Alternatively, unofficially rented properties may not indicate tenants to avoid tax on rent. The options are plenty and depend on whatever seems appropriate to one’s conscience.

Similar issues arrive when using the official city statistics for *grausti* or buildings in a dilapidated state.¹³ Although a share of the vacant properties are in a state of wreck, vacant apartments can be found in partially populated buildings in a good condition and *grausti* can also be well inhabited. In the depopulated city, the unused spaces intertwine with the inhabited ones in a complex manner that becomes apparent only through first-hand experiences.

*When spending summers in my parent’s apartment, I also live in a grausts simply due to the fact that the facade of the building has not been renovated. Grausti are subject to a higher property tax bracket. In recent years, the classification has become more of a tool to incentivise facade renovation than to provide information about the internal upkeep of the building.*¹⁴

In August of 2023, I attempted to do a preliminary mapping of the vacant buildings in the city centre based on observations from the street. While taking photos of a five-storey building that I had assumed was uninhabited due to the unkept state of its windows,

I was approached by the building's owner. It turned out that a handful of apartments facing away from the street were inhabited, and the owners hoped to renovate the remaining ones in time as well. In November of 2023, I was invited on a tour through a tenement house scheduled for renovation over the coming year. We walked through what a few months before had been a cafe, a dental practice, two offices and a few apartments. Among them, one of the dwellings had simply stood empty for the past ten years.

More Approximate, More Intricate

It is a curious situation that although there is overarching knowledge of a depopulation event, the spatialisation of it becomes increasingly approximate. With the two most immediate available data sets having to be re-verified, a quantitative analysis of vacancy on the scale of the city becomes a research project of exponential complexity. To add insult to injury, the mentioned statistics account for the vacancy of living spaces, which could further be accompanied by vacant commercial and other utility spaces that also become disused with the shrinkage of the population and the subsequently waning economic activity.

Attempts to more precisely map the vacancy in the city go back to at least 2013 when the organisation *Free Riga* launched a crowdsourced empty building mapping project *OCCUPY ME*. On a conceptual level, the project tried to remedy the disconnect between the macroscopic depopulation numbers and the identification of exact vacant sites by asking the city inhabitants to submit descriptions of vacancy in their immediate surroundings. What can be taken from this is that neighbourhood life, the street-level perception of a place, held another set of knowledge of the spatial conditions that

15. Elina Libiete, "Free Riga - Void as Opportunity," *FOLD*, December 12, 2018, fold.lv/en/2018/12/free-riga-%E2%80%95-void-as-opportunity/.

the absolute numbers of city registry could not cover.¹⁵

Similarly, Noora Pyyry has revisited the avant-garde group's *Situationist International* practice of *dérive* as a method for urban research. A performative action to critique the overtly planned and commercialised cities of 1960s Western Europe, the *dérive* walks were guided by immediate emotive stimuli in an effort to develop more complex relations in the urban environment. Pyyry conceptualises *dérive* as an academic research method for acquiring an alternative set of knowledge from a lived experience. The individual perception is limited to one's most familiar surroundings; it is flawed by subjectivity, but, in its limits, it is highly attentive. This perception is also emotive, bringing in the equation analysis and attitude that official city data could not taxonomise.¹⁶

16. Noora Pyyry, "From Psychogeography to Hanging-out-knowing: Situationist *Dérive* in Nonrepresentational Urban Research," *Area* 51, no. 2 (June 2019): 321.

There is another kind of value in shifting the gaze from the accuracy of numbers to the wealth of information that the inaccuracy of inhabiting the city has to offer. While acknowledging the quantitative information of the population changes of Rīga in recent history as the overarching setting, the further writing will turn to the qualitative aspects of living alongside the vacancy in the depopulated city. The structure of the following text is given by a walk in Rīga done in November of 2023.











Brīvības 88

Without any shame, I admit that I set out on the walk as a means to structure the writing. I have planned out a path and aligned it to the bibliography. I set out on a November Sunday, and although the walk from my home to the first destination should take 15 minutes, it takes about twice as long. It is simply because on the way I have to stop by:

*Five vacant shops
Four land plots which used to have dilapidated buildings that were recently torn down and now graciously hold patches of grass gently fenced and adorned with signs “private property”
Three buildings that have stopped mid-way through their renovation
Two vacant buildings of modest size.
One disused industrial complex (tobacco factory)*

The list starts reminding a dreary version of a situationist game which I have accidentally invented for myself. I should not be accused of painting a dramatised image of the city. The path I chose is not particularly specific; rather, it is the shortest I take from my home to the city centre, and the Brasa neighbourhood is in no way infamous for abandonment. It does, however, seem that two months of reading on shrinking cities has left me with a more acute eye for a whole lot of empty space that is less or more neatly delineated.

But the destination of the first leg of the walk is the building on Brīvības 88. A six-story tenement house finished in 1910, it was built in the highly ornate, art-nouveau fashion that arrived in the city a few decades after its vogue in central Europe. Stretching over two land plots

and arranged as a complex with a courtyard, it was an ambitious project for its time and, with a 13,000 m² total floor area, remains a prominent structure in the city. The sizeable presence of the building is comically contrasted by the fact that it holds only a tiny shoe outlet and a tanning saloon, topped by five stories of vacant apartments.

The building has been mostly empty since the first wave of emigration in the 1990s. A survey from 2015 found it to be structurally sound.¹⁷ The same year, the proprietor submitted an intention to renovate the building into an apartment complex with a hotel. However, the process has stalled due to the structure's sheer size and historical value, both of which increase the project's expenses that are not met by a demand that could make it a viable venture.¹⁸

“Like a big old house, there’s a lot of space to rattle around in.”¹⁹

So goes the description the writer Will Mawhood has given to the city when commenting on its high amount of vacancy. One can conjure up an image of Brīvības 88 as the prototype of Mawhood's house of Rīga. Standing on a central three-street intersection with its corner turret as the commanding element over a broad streetscape, it brings the solemn calm of a great ruin mixed with unease and perplexion of its decades-long idleness as an apartment building in the city centre.

It may well be the most poignant case of long-term building vacancy in the city; however, as seen on the extended 15-minute walk, unused built space often also comes in other, less spectacular shapes here. The exact causes of each case are complex to follow, especially because Rīga has not followed a single scenario of a shrinking city type but presents a mix of traits of a

17. “Brīvības Iela 88 – Land Registry Data on Real Estate,” accessed December 4, 2023, lursoft.lv/nekustamie-ipasumi/building/01000280060003

18. Evelīna Ozola, Rīga City Chief Designer in conversation with the author, August 25, 2023.

19. Will Mawhood, “‘The Capital of Empty Spaces’: Dealing with the Shrinking of the Great Baltic City,” *Deep Baltic*, January 20, 2016, deepbaltic.com/2016/01/20/the-capital-of-empty-spaces-dealing-with-the-shrinking-of-the-great-baltic-city/.

20. Philipp Oswalt and Tim Rieniets, *Atlas of Shrinking Cities* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 96, 122, 146.

21. Barbara Steiner, “Value Generation in Art and Culture,” in *Shrinking Cities*, ed. Philipp Oswalt (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 438.

22. Mawhood, “The Capital of Empty Spaces.”

23. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London, England; New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin Books, 1997), 33.

post-industrial, post-socialist and suburbanising city, each of which bringing a particular chains of events.²⁰

Rather than creating an expansive taxonomy of them in a quantitative manner, it may serve the intended narrative better to regard them in more general terms as spaces that exist as the surplus of demand in a considerably thinned-out city. There just is not enough need for the space for it to be utilised in an economically viable manner.

Productive and Idle

Barbara Steiner describes vacant spaces in shrinking cities being perceived as temporary disturbances in the general capitalist principles of continuous growth and maximum utilisation. Although buildings can no longer easily be sold to make a profit, a general inertia of their expected performance tends to remain in the eyes of shareholders, resulting in the spaces shifting into an extended state of waiting.²¹ The same is ironically mentioned by the urbanist Jānis Kīnasts on the prevailing dogma in Rīga: “What you do with abandoned property — you don’t do anything, you wait for investment.”²²

In his book *“Species of Spaces”*, Georges Perec describes an inability to imagine a functionless space within a building, making a distinction that unused does not equate to useless. Perec argues that language itself cannot describe such a void but assigns, if not function, then the potential of functionality to a place.²³ Similarly, one could argue that from the proprietor's perspective, the space is far from empty but brimming with potential and future conditions. It is not *nothing* that happens with the space but a continuous, anxious *anticipation*.

Perceiving anticipation as a kind of performance in the space, we may call the unused spaces seen on the walk *idle*. Where *vacant* implies a static quality of space and the opposite of *inhabited*, *idle* would be its counterpart

in describing a qualitative action within a space and the opposite of *productive*. By calling it idle, we can establish a binary of two kinds of performances of the space.

Expanding on the question of performance within space, there is a curious interplay of the two meanings of the word as a *productive action* and a *theatrical spectacle* discussed in *Specific Spaces* by Maria Shéhérazade Giudici. Basing it on writings by Guy Debord, Giudici argues that the display of productivity in the modern city can be perceived as a means to frame and structure the urban capitalist society as a theatrical action in which the city’s population takes part. While monetary wealth measures a concluded productive process, the spectacle of living and working becomes a measure for a productive city unfolding. With this theatrical aspect of the city in mind, she takes the example of Donald Judd’s term *specific objects*, which was used to describe minimalist sculptural forms intended to gain meaning through the relation it created with the spectator’s body.²⁴ She argues that an analogue can be seen in the activity of inhabiting a city in which the population continuously participates. The process of inhabitants living and working becomes the corporeal relation through which the industrial cityscape becomes a meaningful object.²⁵

Although idling, just as inhabiting, is an action that takes place within the spaces, it does so without active participants through whose performance the space could gain meaning, therefore disturbing the expected space-productivity relation. With this, *idle* is not inert and neutral but creates unexpected emotive relations for those observing it next to them.

Future and Past

Although the phenomenon of shrinking cities has been established in Europe for some decades now, the study of what it means to inhabit these places is more recent.

24. Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (New York: Judd Foundation, 2015), 184.

25. Maria Shéhérazade Giudici, “Specific Spaces: Government and the Emergence of Architecture d’accompagnement, 1584-1765,” in *The City as a Project*, ed. Pier Vittorio Aureli (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2013), 162–163.

26. Dace Dzenovska and Daniel M. Knight, “Emptiness: An Introduction,” *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, December 15, 2020, culanth.org/fieldsights/emptiness-an-introduction.

27. Dace Dzenovska, “Emptiness: Capitalism without People in the Latvian Countryside,” *American Ethnologist* 47, no. 1 (February 2020): 11.

28. Dzenovska and Knight, “Emptiness.”

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29. Zane Onckule, “Rīgas Migla [The Fog of Rīga],” *Arterritory.com*, accessed December 4, 2023, artterritory.com/lv/vizuala_maksla/raksti/25273-rigas_migla/.

*“In fact, emptiness can be very full, but not with the “right” things.”*²⁶

Anthropologist Dace Dzenovska has extensively discussed both the individual and collective affective responses in emptying regions. The absence of previous productivity in space is often perceived with discomfort, even nausea.²⁷ It is a collective anxiety brought by a space in an idle state losing its meaning, being *messy* by not following the expected performative logic. From the viewpoint of the general city inhabitant, the binary of idle and productive gains a further temporal division where the positive, productive space is located in the past and a hopeful future. The present then gets assigned an idle anticipation, described not exactly as hope nor despair but as the potential for both.²⁸ In the particular context of Rīga, seeking the image of the past may not only be a search for the logic of the built space. Art historian and critic Zane Onckule has commented on a Latvian fixation on the independent country from 1918 to 1940 as an obsessive yet foggy reference point for constructing a cultural identity after 1991.²⁹ The past Rīga, as the bustling capital, takes a central role in the myth. The view to Rīga’s historic built space then becomes more than a longing for a modernist city logic, but also a longing for a coherent identity.

The subtle, hopeful anxiety permeating an emptied city is, therefore, a double-vision one – both looking backwards to an image of a familiar societal structure within an accordingly built structure and equally eagerly looking forward to a projected prosperous return to such a state. With the two focal points at opposite ends, the present moment becomes a blurred transience without much significance. If, however, as in Rīga, the future-past images stall in their return, transience begins to stretch into blurry decades.

And Somewhere In-between

With the awareness of the macroscopic processes of demography at play, the hopeful future image of the return of a dense and productive city seems at least distant, if not entirely fictional. The idle spaces locked or fenced up for the time being also stretch into blurred decades, subject to the image of how built space in the modern city is expected to perform.

But contrary to being located in the loosely defined present between the binaries of *past and future*, the spaces seem firmly adhering to the binary of *productive or idle*, one or the other. One could argue that just as these places already exist in a blurred present, they should be inhabited in a blurred point between productivity and inactivity. If released from the anxiously hopeful binary, what new performances could this freed space allow beyond the traditional ones of a modern city?

If the anxious hope for a continuous growth of the city is doing us harm and the practice of continuous growth on our finite-resource world is doing harm to everything else,³⁰ perhaps focusing on the blurred present may do us some good.

30. Diego Andreucci and Terrence McDonough, “Capitalism,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 61.











Tallinas 10-3

After gazing at Brīvības 88 for a while, I head back in the direction that I came from. I already walked past the object of the next chapter before. However, our table of contents had to make more sense than our route on a map. I use the opportunity to step over the low chain fence with a sign “forbidden for unauthorised personnel” and walk diagonally across the grassy field where, until 2021, there stood buildings of a chocolate factory. On the other side of the shortcut, we cross the street, enter a driveway and meander through a plot used as a parking lot until we reach a broad territory of garages hidden within the block officially numbered Tallinas 10-3. First, there is a basketball field and a large amount of well-curated graffiti. A bit further inside starts an assault of seating arrangements and parasols bearing the logos of various beverage companies. Apart from the three bars catering for them, within the up-cycled garages, there are also two venues, a gallery space and a fair amount of offices and studios. Somewhere among all of it stands a parked white Tesla. On the frigid November morning, the place is quiet; I am the first to cross the territory in the fresh snow. Come better weather, and the place will be brimming with people on a night out. Knowing precisely the exhaustion that crowds here make one feel on an August evening, I have to awkwardly admit that despite everything, I appreciate the temporary quiet. The place is full, but perhaps here as well, it is not with the “right” things that have taken place.

Tallinas Square was founded in 2018 when the building reuse organisation *Free Riga* and the proprietor of the former ambulance vehicle station struck a deal for

temporary use of the territory. The 4,000 m2 of interior space, along with the adjacent outdoor area, was named a *creative quarter* and, with *Free Riga* as a mediator, leased out to interested vendors and entrepreneurs.

Free Riga has been active since 2013, first as a non-governmental organisation trying to quantify the vacancy in the city and later becoming an initiator of temporary use projects. In its activity, *Free Riga* utilises a clause in the Latvian taxation law that if a *public benefit organisation* is given full usage rights of a building or a territory, its property tax is reduced by 90%.³¹ This, along with an agreement for appropriate upkeep of the garage complex, was beneficial enough for the proprietor to install *Free Riga* as the supervisor of the property. From there, the organisation curated lessees who pay rent significantly below the market price if they devote some time to the upkeep and improvement of the spaces.³²

The strategy of *Free Riga* is not particularly unique. One can even dare to say that the image of what a creative quarter like *Tallinas Square* in a dilapidated part of a city looks like is long since a cliché. The practice of granting unused space for cultural-engagement-oriented ventures that otherwise would not be able to compete in the rental market has even been advocated by planning bodies across Europe since the early 2000s when shrinking cities were starting to be identified as a prevalent issue. Based on early, self-initiated cultural renewal examples such as those in 1990s Berlin and Manchester, the official strategies find their logic in the fact that in particular urban conditions where other economic activity would falter, cultural programmes can be far more adaptable and directly improve the quality of life in the neighbouring area.³³ It remains unclear if the tax law that *Free Riga* utilises in its operation was introduced with such urban renewal projects in mind. However, it has to be noted as a curious and specifically local tool for incentivising idle space reuse.

31. "Par nekustamā īpašuma nodokļa atvieglojumu piešķiršanas kārtību Rīgā [On the procedure for granting real estate tax benefits in Riga]," Legal Acts of the Republic of Latvia, accessed December 4, 2023, likumi.lv/doc.php?id=329190.

32. Elīna Libiete, "Free Riga - Void as Opportunity," *FOLD*, December 12, 2018, fold.lv/en/2018/12/free-riga-%E2%80%95-void-as-opportunity/.

33. Barbara Steiner, "Value Generation in Art and Culture," in *Shrinking Cities*, ed. Philipp Oswalt (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 438–439.

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34. "Free Riga Projects," *Free Riga*, accessed December 4, 2023, freeriga.lv/places.

35. Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016), 75.

36. *Industriālā Mantojuma Dienas - Paneldiskusija "Pirms Un Pēc" [Industrial Heritage Days - Panel Discussion "Before and After"]* (Latvijas arhitektu savienība [Latvian Union of Architects], 2023), youtube.com/

Tallinas Square was initiated by *Free Riga*, but at the time of writing this, the organisation had moved on to other building projects.³⁴ The spaces, therefore, were already rented by the venues and studios directly from the owners without mediation by *Free Riga*. The status of the *public benefit organisation* then had been a mechanism for a gradual return of a productive process in the space. The grit and graffiti of the recent temporary reuse project now mostly serve as, quoting Stavros Stavrides, *carefully staged displays of otherness*³⁵ for the commercially booming venues.

Although one may be tempted to dismiss *Tallinas Square* as a case of gentrification with the negative connotations of gradual displacement of the neighbourhood populace, the effect of the project is more ambiguous. In the case of Rīga, which is abound with vacancy, reuse projects like *Tallinas* do bring new qualities and social spaces to localities and with time may even contribute to a return of the population to the previously vacant dwellings. In urban planning discussions of Rīga, gentrification is used as a surprisingly neutral term, especially when it comes to improving the relations that former industrial territories have with the current city living patterns.³⁶

What can be questioned, however, is the scale at which such a *modus operandi* can be applied to the vacancy in the city. Architecture critic Artis Zvirgzdiņš has commented on the proportion of disused territories compared to the remaining shrunken population as being overtly expansive to be realistically turned back into productive space. With the limited population that could engage as producers and consumers, creative squares in Rīga seem to have a clear life-cycle of five to ten years, dictated by when a new site of cultural interest is established. The previous then either closes down or loses the public dimension to become a rented space offering offices for

market prices. Like so, *Tallinas Square* was preceded by *Andrejsala* and *Spīķeri*.³⁷ Such sites then start to seem more like isolated points in the urban expanse rather than a universal strategy easily applicable to idle sites.

The qualitative contribution that *Tallinas* brings to the neighbourhood becomes more ambivalent on a second glance as well. With commercial venues and bars currently taking up the majority of the quarter, the space caters to a specific audience. This impression is further solidified on weekend evenings when one encounters age checks and entry fees to access the quarter. Far from emancipatory practices that the initial *Free Riga* activists describe, there are clear roles of a consumer or a producer that one takes in the quarter.

*“How can we think and do things differently beyond the logic of maximum utilisation that has saturated everything?”*³⁸

Barbara Steiner more explicitly criticises the space reuse strategies in shrinking cities of eastern Germany in the early 2000s. The images of vacant spaces as emancipated zones for culture and creativity were eagerly implemented in the plans for city regeneration on a municipal level. In official city guidelines, creatives were assigned a role to generate symbolic value, which could thereafter be swiftly replaced by economic value. What Steiner finds contradictory is that by becoming part of an official paradigm, building reuse projects lose their ability to question and reinvent themselves but rather start abiding by expected frameworks.³⁹ Some decades earlier, for Henri Lefebvre, the *new man* of the urban environment was disappointing precisely for the same lack of ability to form new, complex relations with the environment it inhabits.⁴⁰

What is underwhelming in the temporary reuse projects

37. Ibid.

38. Steiner, “Value Generation in Art and Culture,” 441.

39. Steiner, “Value Generation in Art and Culture,” 440.

40. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Malden (Massachusetts): Blackwell, 1996), 149.

discussed is that they seem to be unable to house processes outside of the productive space paradigm. It can be argued that *Tallinas Square* and the reuse projects before it do not engage much with the opportunities within the blurred midpoint between *idle* and *productive* but have rushed from one end of the binary to the other. Although it is a solution for certain sites with corresponding spatial qualities, with a third of the inhabitants gone, there is simply too much space in the city for it to be universally applicable.

One may wonder if the return to a productive space in *Tallinas Square* is not guided by the already described longing and expectation of performative productivity. The tax reduction mechanisms employed by *Free Riga*, as well as their notions that a used, cared-for space is prevented from degrading, are positive practices in the idling city. However, the question remains if the performance that takes place within the reused sites could be more diverse without a focus on the end-point as a reinstated commercial space. Is it possible to truly escape the anxiety of the idle city and find what other, more adaptable performances the idleness can host?











Barona 75

It takes less than ten minutes to walk to the next chapter. Arriving at a two-meter metal sheet fence that stretches entirely around a seemingly empty block in the city centre, I am slightly late for my meeting with Renāte, who is already there with a stroller. Renāte is an art historian who lives in the area and, in 2021, with two other cultural workers and a landscape architect, initiated the Gardens of Sporta Pils. She unlocks a gate, and we enter the gardens. It is the off-season, but Renāte agreed to stroll around the territory and discuss the project that, at least for me, seems to be a better thing to happen to a vacant place.

41. Artis Zvirgzdiņš, "Sporta pils. Gals un sākums [Sporta Pils. The Beginning and the End]," *A4D*, June 9, 2014, a4d.lv/raksti/sporta-pils-gals-un-sakums/

42. "Sporta pils — in memoriam," *A4D*, December 27, 2007, a4d.lv/notikumi/sporta_pils__in_memoriam/.

Sporta Pils was an indoor ice hall built in 1970. Privatised in the late 1990s, its territory was to be redeveloped into an apartment complex.⁴¹ In preparation for the redevelopment, the hall was torn down in 2007. However, with the world financial crisis hitting the following year and the housing demand shrinking considerably, the project was never built, and the land plot taking up a whole block has stood empty ever since.⁴² The brown metal fence did an excellent job of blocking any street-level view of the plot for fourteen years. Unbothered, the territory, with its monumental five-meter-deep pit where the ice rink had stood, developed into a wild meadow, even featuring a handful of birch trees that had somehow managed to grow. The secret garden sprouting over the rubble was seen only by those who happened to overlook the block from the neighbouring houses. Renāte was one of them, and at the end of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown and with the frustrating longing for the outdoors that it brought, the idea for establishing a community garden came about.

An agreement was reached with the proprietors for the temporary use of the territory. The following spring, the Sporta Pils gardens opened to 150 participants from neighbouring buildings. The gardeners split the electricity and water bills as well as pay a small fee for the use of the elevated flowerbeds surrounding the untouched wild meadow in the pit. Additionally, they have to participate in general cleanup events and take turns watching the entrance during the summer when the territory is open for visitors four days a week.⁴³ As a lone monument in the centre of the pit stands the *Palette kiosk* – a project by the invited artist Daria Melnikova. The artist runs the kiosk alone on summer weekends by selling homemade snacks and beverages – the only instance when commercial activity occurs here, although it does leave an impression of being a sincere gesture of hospitality rather than an actual business venture.

Someplace other than productive

Urban gardening is a broad research subject that one can get lost in. According to Michael Classens, the academic discussion of urban gardens tends to be polarised – both praised for the potential to counter various social issues or dismissed as overtly utopian.⁴⁴ The narrative of what urban gardens are a solution to also tends to change according to the social challenges of the time and the specific urban context.⁴⁵ With this in mind, one must tread carefully and not indulge in general idealisation. Let us look towards the *Sporta Pils* with a limited scope and remain within the current discussion of the relationships with vacancy. There seems to be a different attitude towards being in an idle space than the one seen in *Tallinas Square*. Rather than turning to tropes of, for example, urban food schemes, it may be more appropriate to discuss the gardens as a form of creativity that does not have broad

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43. Elina Libiete, “Transforming Nowhere into a Place — Gardens of Sporta Pils,” *FOLD*, April 3, 2021, fold.lv/en/2021/03/transforming-nowhere-into-a-place-gardens-of-sporta-pils/.

44. Michael Classens, “The Nature of Urban Gardens: Toward a Political Ecology of Urban Agriculture,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 32, no. 2 (June 2015): 231.

45. Laura J. Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 8.

structural impacts but instead minute qualitative ones.

Many of the gardeners cultivate a handful of wild strawberries or flowers. Instead of emphasising productivity, the gardens have a more ambiguous, recreational, and creative nature. At the limited scale at which *Sporta Pils* gardening takes place, it seems to, first and foremost, be amusing to grow a pumpkin or some marigolds in a flowerbed over the summer without the need to dwell on the activity’s financial prospects. Henri Lefebvre has criticised how the social needs of urban society are perceived as deceptively predictable and ordered – described, for the most part, within the cycles of production and consumption. Drawing from anthropology, he suggests that city dwellers crave both security and structure, as well as openness and uncertainty—complementary opposites rooted in ancient societal aspects of symbolism and play. The interplay of these contrasting elements enables individuals to form more complex and meaningful relationships with their surrounding environment. Furthermore, Lefebvre advocates for individual creation and play as essential components of urbanity, promoting freedom for spontaneous space use not solely for productive activities but for creative endeavours that complement them. Energy must be gathered in rest and spent in creation and play.⁴⁶ Rather than being a productive space, the gardens fulfil another role in urban life, whose good is not that easily quantifiable. More than anything, *Sporta Pils* provides a new form of agency in space—a chance for play and individual creation for participants, adding complexity to each individual’s lived experience in the city.

Interesting observations about the gardens can also be drawn out by examining the activities of care.

The field of feminist economics explores care work as labour with a focus on maintenance, continuity, and repair, primarily occurring within the domestic sphere and largely

46. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Malden (Massachusetts): Blackwell, 1996), 147–151.

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done without remuneration – upkeep of a household or tending to one’s family as examples. However, the field of study suggests that care and maintenance are instrumental for productive work to occur, challenging the magnitude of importance with which paid labour reigns over care work. For us to live well and for productivity to take place, a qualitative environment must be maintained.⁴⁷ In this context, *Sporta Pils* becomes a field where care is practised on multiple levels. Renāte’s initial action of initiating the project can be seen as caring about the overgrown field and the potential qualities it could bring to the neighbourhood. Additionally, the gardeners collectively practice care for the field’s upkeep, ensuring its continued supportive role in creating a more complex and fulfilling local environment. Moreover, gardeners also perform care for their individual flowerbeds. Similar to how care activities facilitate productive labour, the non-productive environment of *Sporta Pils* contributes specific qualities to the urban experience. By acknowledging the qualitative changes that the gardens bring, separate yet necessary for productive city life, they transcend the binary categorisation of *idle* or *productive*. Instead, they exist in a category of spaces that are open to change, addressing human needs beyond those met by a productive city while simultaneously relating to and enriching it.

47. Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women’s Lives*, ed. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990), 35–36.

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Relations and agreements

On our walk around the territory, Renāte shares her thoughts on the deliberate resistance to monetising the gardens and turning the organising team into the property managers. Her focus was on negotiating the field as a common interest.

Everyone is always telling us where we can raise money, but to be honest, we don’t really need the money.

Gardeners pay their rent for flowerbeds and the communal water and electricity bill. The whole project is also about how you get back as much as you put in. If you want to see change, you have to do it yourself. If we would have accumulated money, we would have just started to hire people to take care of the area, but then the essence of the community project and the challenges and arguments that come with it disappear. I’ve also resisted getting paid for it as a project manager, because then I feel like it changes the dynamic in the relationship a lot. Now the situation is: “We don’t have money, how do we solve problems together?” The other scenario would be: “We have a problem; we are calling a technician”. We also thought from the beginning that we would make a cultural program – we had so much space, we could rent out the space, there was so much to do. But we quickly realised that we wanted to go against the way cultural reuse spaces usually play out. Instead, we just did almost nothing. One of the hardest things to do was to keep telling myself that there are a million things we can do without. Instead, we turned the focus inward – on learning how to communicate openly and honestly within the community.”⁴⁸

The Gardens of Sporta Pils shouldn’t be limited to being seen solely as an urban gardening project. They speak just as much about the negotiation between various social groups, highlighting how these groups converge in a shared space and collaborate on collective creations. Founded by an art historian, the gardens not only invite artists to display their works but, in their totality could be thought of as an artistic research project exploring the dynamics of relationships among local residents.

48. Renāte Lagzdina, founder and director of *Sporta Pils Gardens* in conversation with the author, November 24, 2023.

In 1998, Nicolas Bourriaud published *Relational Aesthetics*, aiming to provide a framework for a wave of artistic practices of the 1990s marked by highly social, performative actions. A notable piece discussed by Bourriaud is Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (free)*, which involved turning a New York gallery into a day and night accessible lounge space, open day and night, where the artist cooked and served traditional Thai dishes to visitors. Rather than emphasising the meaning inherent in objects placed in the space or the performance of cooking by the artist, the act of encounter, communication and negotiation was highlighted as the central point of the work. The artwork was the platform on which encounters could occur. Unlike earlier notions of societal change embodied in artworks like Joseph Beuys' *social sculptures*, Bourriaud contends that the new generation of works displays a shifted attitude and scale. Rather than presenting utopian gestures of absolute societal change placed in the future, the relational artists of the 1990s were more concerned with "learning to inhabit the world in a better way."⁴⁹ Therefore, instead of theoretical utopias, the work of Tiravanija and others is more focused on establishing functional "microtopias" in the present.⁵⁰

*"It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows."*⁵¹

Looking at relational aesthetics, *Sporta Pils* can be viewed as a kindred platform for negotiation and agreement. That, although taxing, allows to arrive at new and complex functions. Without all the activities being delineated, many uses for the site were found by the invited gardeners rather than the original team.

49. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2009), 13.

50. Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 51–79.

51. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 45.

52. Lagzdiņa, interview.

53. Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 173–174.

54. Silke Helfrich and David Bollier, "Commons," in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 78.

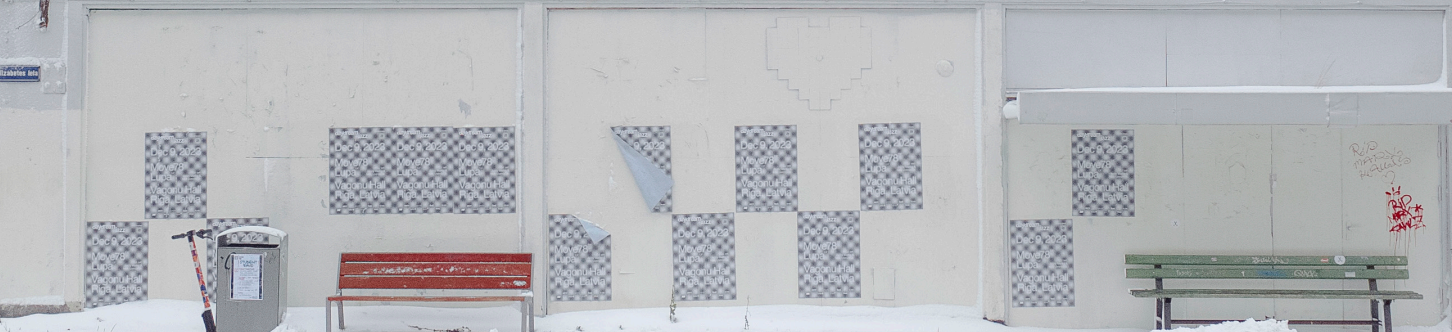
On the visit in late November, the gardens are quiet. The flowerbeds stand neatly arranged. Someone has come to plant daffodil bulbs for next spring. Renāte tells how, in a few weeks, when there is more snow, parents will send kids to play by sliding down the pit.

*"They have a lot of space to run around, but at the same time, they are also in a fenced and supervised area – the surrounding buildings have windows to the gardens. And here they run down, up, slide down. It's obviously somewhat dangerous because, from time to time, we find some rubble left from the ice rink. Luckily, no accidents have happened."*⁵²

I try to imagine how nice it would be to live next to the gardens as a nine-year-old.

The open-ended nature of the territory, which can be appropriated for new uses through dialogue, relates to what Lefebvre called an urban inhabitant's *right to the city* – a right for individual freedoms and patterns of inhabitation, distinct from property rights.⁵³ This distinction is crucial, as the gardens are not as concerned with the object of the land plot or its financial prospects but rather with the subjects that, for the time being, can take place. Doing something and doing it together holds more immediate value than having.⁵⁴ The value offered by *Sporta Pils* is evidently not monetary. One could argue that the site has sidestepped the pressure to be solely productive and has instead embraced a mode of use that is no longer idle, though not necessarily productive in the conventional sense. And it seems to work. For Rīga, a broader change of attitude towards how space can become valuable may do some good.







55. "Elizabetes Iela 16 – Land Registry Data on Real Estate," accessed December 18, 2023, lursoft.lv/business/zgr/card/view/34311TUZTF#zgr-card-content.

56. Christophe Van Gerrewey, *Choosing Architecture: Criticism, History and Theory since the 19th Century* (Lausanne: EPFL press, 2019), 263–264.

Elizabetes 16

The final chapter is a bit further into the city centre. To avoid distractions on the way there, I decide to ride two stops on the tram. Then, it is a ten-minute walk through two parks. The building on Elizabetes 16 is located as centrally as one can get, around the corner from the National Museum of Art. As gathered from Google Street View, it has been vacant for at least thirteen years. The land registry database indicates that it has been owned by a property developer since 2005.⁵⁵ Sometime between 2019 and 2022, it succumbed to tax pressures for building upkeep, and its facade was renovated in an admirably sleek manner. The grey of the walls has also been generously plastered on the window frames and the boarded-up openings.

The resulting effect is particular enough for me to make my way to it as well as make place for it in the structure of this writing. The municipality has tax mechanisms not only for supporting building reuse, as seen in Tallinas but also for incentivising facade renovation. In this case, the latter has been avidly implemented in an otherwise closed-off space, creating a dissonance between the presentability and actual usability of the building.

Amusingly, it seems to be at least aware of its prime location next to the art museum. The monotone paint job, along with the decades-long inaccessibility, seem to have taken away any notion of a habitable space within. One might think of works by Rachel Whiteread when looking at the building. Like a concrete cast, the grey of the facade seems to continue throughout the width and depth of the building.⁵⁶

In the 1986 essay *Of Other Spaces*, Michel Foucault coined the term *heterotopia*. Etymologically made of *hetero* – *other* in conjunction with *topos* – *place*, it is offered as the opposite of *utopia*. Unlike the unreal place of ideals, these *other places* are real, produced by all societies for housing events and individuals that deviate from the expected performances. They are external but, at the same time, form a part of the total societal structure. Some of the more simple examples offered are care houses, prisons, and cemeteries.⁵⁷

Stavros Stavrides, however, expands on this definition, characterising heterotopias as places where differences can converge. He looks more towards heterotopias in marginalised, unused or temporary spaces established during uprisings, paying attention to their clear boundary and exteriority to the surrounding *normal* space.⁵⁸ In a heterotopic space, the rules and constructs of the rest of the city environment are foreign. The tension occurring at the border of the two holds a potential where an osmotic process can happen between the conditions – an encounter. The space becomes a platform where existing players can arrange new sets of relations and behaviours distinct from those established in the *normality* of the city.⁵⁹

Stavrides discusses heterotopias in the broader context of urban commons, distinguishing them from public and private spaces. Commons, as a concept, comes traditionally from agrarian societies and are understood as a shared pool of resources inherited jointly from generation to generation – be it forests, rivers, or foraging territories that are both freely accessible and cared for collectively.⁶⁰ Placed in an urban context, the idea of commons questions how citizens can have claim and agency on common resources without privatisation or control over them.⁶¹ While public space demands behaviours and laws established by a ruling authority, and private space sets rules by an individual, common spaces

57. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

58. Stavros Stavrides, “Emerging Common Spaces as a Challenge to the City of Crisis,” *City* 18, no. 4–5 (September 3, 2014): 547.

59. Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016), 73–75.

60. Urban Commons Research Collective, *Urban Commons Handbook* (Barcelona: dpr-barcelona, 2022), 18.

61. Urban Commons Research Collective, *Urban Commons Handbook*, 23.

62. Stavrides, *Common Space*, 54–55.

represent the blurred point where groups can define a shared space in a way that benefits all members. For Stavrides, heterotopias serve as a clean slate on which new programs and relations of commoning can be established, separate from prevailing norms in public and private spaces.⁶²

A structured daydream

Facing the sculptural building lacking an interior, it is tempting to suggest that through their uneasy absurdity and lack of productivity, the idle spaces of Rīga could also be considered heterotopic. In their state of idleness, they deviate from their expected function yet remain deeply woven into the fabric of the city. Extending this comparison, the pit of *Sporta Pils* appears as a successful example where the two-meter metal fence was not enough to hold off the osmotic process described by Stavrides, allowing a new kind of communal performance to seep in. The space became a shared resource that brings a common good.

Taking *otherness* of idle spaces as a generally fertile ground for commoning processes, one can indulge in a structured daydream, imagining a broader change in attitude towards vacancy in Rīga. A scenario where idling spaces frequently succumb to the tension of proactive inhabitants aware of the potential they hold for common uses. Balancing between hopeful fiction and concrete observation, the following texts look at aspects of urban commoning practices, specifically in the context of Rīga.

Non-commodified performances

In Rīga, idle spaces are typically privately owned, raising an early question about whether common use can truly persist within privatised domains. In general, the theory of urban commons is at a friction point with the commodification of urban space, asserting that all participants of urban life

should have more significant stakes in urban resources.⁶³ It can be a broad and challenging statement, especially due to the problematic nationalisation of property in the region's not-so-recent past that has kept neoliberal sentiments high for the past 30 years.⁶⁴ To talk about commoning practices in the specific context in a feasible manner, one must look towards intertwining ownership and appropriation in coexistence. Already in *The Right to the City*, Lefebvre distinguishes the right of participation and appropriation of urban space as separate from the right of property.⁶⁵ David Harvey brings the theory closer to contemporary practice, describing that observed urban commoning practices are primarily established for non-commodified uses.⁶⁶ One can argue that where the right to property is tied to the commercialisation of it, the right of appropriation concerns all the other performances a space can hold.

As seen in *Sporta Pils*, there are processes that run parallel to productive work. Activities of care and maintenance are inseparable from it and, to an extent, even make it possible. Additionally, there is play and creative activity contributing to a more diverse lived experience in the productive city. By changing and expanding perceptions of what constitutes worthwhile space use, idle spaces can be released from the perpetual waiting they are subjected to and serve as a clean slate for constructing new kinds of performances. A vacant lot can be somewhat easily imagined as a garden. What would it take to further imagine an empty flat as a place for the other building inhabitants to hang their laundry or, alternatively, a vacant retail space, with its broader accessibility, as a community centre or a playroom for kids? While the demand for commercial performance of a space is awaited, other performances, whose value is more subtle, can seize the day. A communal laundry room alleviates housework; a playroom is a place where parents

63. Urban Commons Research Collective, *Urban Commons Handbook*, 24.

64. Matiss Groskaufmanis and Evelina Ozola, *The Architecture of Together and Apart: An Inquiry into Apartment Buildings* (Riga: New Theatre Institute of Latvia, 2018), 6.

65. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Malden (Massachusetts): Blackwell, 1996) 173–174.

66. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2019), 73–74.

67. Ulla Alla, “30 Aastat Pausi: Uurides Mittetegemist [30 Year Pause: Research on Doing Nothing]” (Tallinn, Estonian Academy of Arts, 2021), 54.

68. Sevince Bayrak and Oral Göktas, *Ghost Stories: The Carrier Bag Theory of Architecture* (Barcelona: ListLab, 2023), 19–20.

69. Alla, “30 Aastat Pausi [30 Year Pause],” 54.

can split up work and take turns looking over a pack of kids. The free space holds a multitude of values apart from those monetarily quantifiable. By collectively reconceptualising the importance that non-productive activities can have when temporarily given an idle space, a different, proactive attitude towards them can be established without necessarily challenging ownership in the long term.

Preservation

The establishment of common programmes goes beyond the good for the new actors involved but also contributes to the continuity of the built space. Commenting on a similar situation of buildings as dormant economic tools in neighbouring Estonia, Ulla Alla puts forward that it is not only the right to a property that ownership implies but equally as much an obligation of care for it.⁶⁷ In their dormancy, the spaces are still subject to entropic processes and require maintenance. It is challenging to care for a space as it lays idle for decades if no one is present to notice that care is needed.⁶⁸ Alla argues that if the act of caring is not accomplished by the proprietor, then it is worthwhile that this responsibility is shared among new transient actors.⁶⁹ A space in use is continuously seen. Through agreed conditions for temporary use and, furthermore, an attachment to the space as a meaningful part of a community's modes of living, the *seeing* can transform into proactive *caring* and upkeep. The appropriation then becomes beneficial for all parties involved, including the physical space itself.

Legislation

In practice, taxation tools are already in place to encourage the intermediate use of vacant properties. However, the requirement for a *public benefit organisation* status significantly restricts its application to a select few individuals with

specific legal knowledge.⁷⁰ One does not hear of neighbours registering as an organisation to establish, for example, a laundry room. Yet, with adjustments to the law, particularly focusing on neighbourhood or building collectives, the incentives for reuse could become more flexible and accessible to a broader range of spaces and user groups.

Transience

With images of the productive city placed in the past and the future, the new space uses have to situate themselves in the blurry present. This position also asks users to come to terms with their transience. Renāte is not concerned about *Sporta Pils* use contract ending in two years; she is more proud that other neighbourhoods have created their own gardens inspired by her project.⁷¹ More than long-term continuity in a specific space, what is crucial is the example of potential performances that can propagate and adapt to other conditions and users.

Image

While tax incentive programmes, which already exist to some extent, form one part of the equation, an equally important aspect is a general shift in attitude towards vacant spaces—a learned proactivity. Beyond the physical properties, Stavrides describes inhabited environments as images that intertwine spatial relations and arrangements with social ones. Referring to writings by Maurice Godelier, he argues that such images are not passive reflections of societies but also actively shape them.⁷² The seen performance in an environment gradually becomes the norm. In a city saturated with images of spaces in waiting, apathy towards them becomes the learned natural behaviour. However, with new garden initiatives following Renāte’s efforts, one

70. “Par nekustamā īpašuma nodokli Rīgā [Real estate tax in Riga],” Legal Acts of the Republic of Latvia, accessed December 4, 2023, likumi.lv/doc.php?id=275681.

71. Renāte Lagzdiņa, founder and director of *Sporta Pils Gardens* in conversation with the author, November 24, 2023.

72. Stavrides, *Common Space*, 215–216, 222.

can remain hopeful that local inhabitants are fast learners. Examples of inventive, proactive reuse of space for common purposes become the images that develop new societal attitudes towards the city space. Currently, the new images are primarily concerned with unused lots being repurposed for gardening. Looking hopefully towards the future, the images, with favourable conditions and ardent communities, may well seep into other spatial conditions and develop into more diverse programmes.

Non-design

Hoping for something to take place may well sound defeatist from a design perspective, but one must tread carefully not to limit what commoning spaces can be by pre-determining them.

*All utopias are depressing because they leave no room for chance, for difference, for the ‘miscellaneous’. Everything has been set in order and order reigns. Behind every utopia there is always some great taxonomic design: a place for each thing and each thing in its place.*⁷³

Furthering Perec’s succinct comment, Lefebvre states that no single professional, be it an architect, sociologist, or politician, can design new social relations. Instead, they can foster favourable conditions for their development.⁷⁴ As interpreted by Stavrides, common spaces are inherently produced by people to meet precisely their communal needs rather than being based on pre-existing patterns.⁷⁵ Therefore, commoning as a process in an emptied city can be broadly applicable only if it is adaptable to a multitude of conditions and users, existing not as a singular plan but as an ever-expanding process continuously developed through group

73. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1997), 207.

74. Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 150–151.

75. Stavrides, *Common Space*, 43.

efforts. It may well be messy, but contrary to commercial reuse projects like *Tallinas*, it is significantly more scalable and adaptable. Coming from a local understanding of a place and a subsequent negotiation, it closely aligns with the real local needs. *Sporta Pils* was not intended as a playground, but there was a lack of one and it served the purpose well.⁷⁶

76. Lagzdina, interview.

Still standing in front of Elizabetes 16, I catch myself doing a balancing exercise. For a chapter, I have been swinging between Rīga and writings placed far away from it. Mid-swing, I place myself in a hopeful blend between the two – a city that is fictional but not farfetched enough to seem impossible. The point of the exercise appears to be arriving at the position between the two that is the most feasible. I return to the real city as its physicality reminds me of itself – I am starting to get cold. The balancing exercise then comes to an end; I turn and begin my way back.

I come back home, slightly exhausted from the cold and relieved to take off a few too many layers of jumpers I had put on in anticipation of the long walk. Although in reality, it was multiple walks during the week in November visiting Rīga, condensed into one more perfect image of a walk, further supplemented by countless imagined strolls and *Google Street View* sessions. If one is not distracted, the walk takes about an hour, and one simply visits two abandoned buildings, some garages and a construction pit. After having done the perfect walk and having written on it, I retrospectively start wondering what to call it.

Sara Hendren has described a string of phrases to be used as synonyms for the term *designer*. A fitting one from her list could be *the orchestrator of attention*⁷⁷. The walk then could be called a curation of a few unremarkable buildings to describe a relationship between vacant space and city inhabitants. However, as the text progresses, it seems less of a description and more of a speculation of what should change, starting to resemble a soft manifesto. Truthfully, I am too involved with the city to remain on a level of neutral observation.

Looking at the pile of slightly sweaty jumpers that I have tossed on the floor when stepping back indoors, I come back to the image of Rīga as clothes that have become awkwardly too big. These garments are not only oversized but also well-worn by many before. The recent history of Soviet rule has already been discussed. A bit earlier – around a hundred years ago, most legislative proceedings in the city were done in German⁷⁸. Two hundred years before

77. Jenny Odell, *Inhabiting the Negative Space* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2021), 23.

78. J. W. Hiden, “The Baltic Germans and German Policy towards Latvia after 1918,” *The Historical Journal* 13, no. 2 (1970): 296.

79. Hanno Brand and Leos Müller, eds., *The Dynamics of Economic Culture in the North Sea and Baltic Region: In the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2007), 242.

80. Zane Onckule, “Vaguely Baltic, Nearly Sisters: By Way of ‘New East,’ ‘New North,’ and ‘New (Queer) Beyond,’” MoMA post, October 9, 2019, post.moma.org/vaguely-baltic-nearly-sisters-by-way-of-new-east-new-north-and-new-queer-beyond/.
81. Stavrides, *Common Space*, 222.

that, it had the title of the most populous city in the Swedish Empire.⁷⁹ The current Rīgans must make sense of how exactly this thrifted piece of clothing should be worn.

Commenting on the foggy cultural identity of the postcolonial Baltics, Zane Onckule calls for an unapologetic self-definition, free from external labels that tend to have a binary nature: The East/The West/The North, Soviet/post-Soviet, poor/rich, centre/periphery.⁸⁰ Although Onckule talks of another type of garment that the region has to learn to wear, it can be argued that the binarity of space use in the city is also a behaviour learned from other urban contexts.⁸¹ It may do some good to have an honest reevaluation of it and look towards a relationship with the city’s free space that dares to be contextual and unapologetically individual.

The takeaway from all the oversized, generously worn sweaters is not to wait for them to miraculously take a different shape but to wholeheartedly own them as fashion statements. Clearly different from store-bought ones but nevertheless unique and with plenty of character.

The particular contemporary situation in Rīga holds many potentials of how space could be negotiated for new sensitive uses. One can hope that rather than remaining limited to a few projects by some oddball citizens, the emptied city could gradually develop an overarching societal attitude that makes a distinction between the right to property and the rights of use and appropriation. It may well be that, in time, Rīga will return to a more familiar image of a productive city. For a while still, there will be plenty of space that may do other kinds of good until then.

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Iconography

Figure 1. Total growth rate, birth rate, death rate and crude net migration rate per 1000 inhabitants in Latvia from 1950 to 2020.

Source: “World Population Prospects 2022 – Total Population by Five-Year Age Group, Region, Subregion and Country, Annually for 1950-2100” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), accessed December 4, 2023, population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/.

Figure 2. Population of the capital cities of Northern Europe from 1950 to 2020.

“Population of Urban Agglomerations with 300,000 Inhabitants or More in 2018, by Country, 1950-2035” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), accessed February 1, 2024, population.un.org/wup/Download/.

Figure 3. Map of Rīga with highlighted 100 x 100 meter grid coverage points where the number of permanent residents has diminished in the time period from 2000 to 2020.

“Population 100 x 100 Meter Grid Coverage” (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia), accessed January 2, 2024, data.gov.lv/dati/eng/dataset/rezgis.

Thank you

Mom and Dad for the unending support.
Vincent, Dieter and Rubén for the
academic guidance and encouragement.
Evelīna, Helēna, Renāte for the crucial
input in making the project possible.
All of the friends, whose knowledge and
presence continuously bring me joy.



2024, Pauls Rietums

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