

Design:
Veronika Valk

A perfect flower bed new seeds, new futures

By Annie Talvé

Estonia is a country surrounded by water. The venerable Baltic Sea port of Tallinn is the country's capital. The Gulf of Finland separates Estonia from its northern neighbour and linguistic cousin, Finland. To the west lies the majestic Lake Peipus, marking its territorial border with Russia. Its southern border with Latvia is Estonia's only mainland connection.

During fifty years of Soviet occupation, which ended in 1991, Estonia's numerous waterfronts were off limits to its citizens. Classified as military zones, the country's sea, lake and river fronts were no-go areas. By the time Tallinn

becomes Europe's Cultural Capital for 2011, the sea front will have been reinvented along with the Estonian psyche.

That's the hope of Tallinn-based architect, Veronika Valk. Part of a new guard of architects, artists and urban planners, Valk is experimenting with the playful use of light and sound to entice Estonians out of their gloomy winter funk.

The Tallinn Festival of Light in January 2009 enabled Valk and her colleagues to extend their experimental work with light and public space across a broader terrain. Celebrating energy efficiency, innovation and aesthetics, the

festival was also the opening act for a more ambitious vision – to create a 'kilometre of culture' along the city's once forbidden waterfront.

Valk's ability to articulate the nexus between aesthetics, social psychology and political change made her a perfect choice for the National Architecture Conference held in Melbourne in late April. Interviewed for ABC Radio program *Artworks*, she spoke eloquently about light as a "mood modifier".

"If we were to approach public space as if it were our own domain, something that we care for....cont'd page 2

A perfect flower bed.... new modes, new politics

continued....

... it opens up a whole new range of possibilities for the the political system to develop and emerge into something new," said Valk. Dispensing packets of flower seeds to Tallinn's residents, was a practical way of shaping new attitudes to public space. The flower seeds were designed to be placed on the soles of sneakers and people were encouraged to walk along their favourite paths – from home to work or school or college – planting the flower seeds as they went.

Reinvention of public space

Bringing joy and playfulness to urban planning, influences the mood of the city and the way in which things get done, argues Valk. Light, sound and seeds become a "tool for overcoming bitterness," she says. Architecture and art can do more than improve the aesthetics of space; they can impact on human physiology and psychology.

The 2005 Light Dome, which hovered above Tallinn's bustling town square, Raekoja plats, like a giant cupola, "is not just an aesthetic experiment - it has a direct biological influence," said Valk, shortly after the installation. "Almost half of the local population in Estonia is suffering from SAD (Seasonally Adjusted Disorder syndrome). This is about

architectural light therapy in urban public spaces as a mood moderator."

For Valk, architecture "is the perfect flower bed in which to plant these different seeds of science, philosophy, aesthetics and psychology....how to positively transform society, how to learn new modes of collaboration, how to cross over in architecture between design and scientific research, and how to find ways to integrate artists into landscaping and urban planning developments."

These seeds will ultimately bear political fruit, especially if smart design for kids is included. Drawing on research by Estonian psychologists and sociologists, Valk's architectural practice, Zizi & Yoyo, is currently designing a number of kindergartens and a youth centre. Creating more sociable and nurturing spaces – buildings, playgrounds, classrooms – is a "shortcut to the future and the future of politics," says Valk. ∞

"Architecture is a perfect flower bed in which to plant these different seeds of science, philosophy, aesthetics and psychology."

Veronika Valk

The Light Dome in Tallinn's bustling town square; Veronika Valk, architect and artist



Project Sisu Dialogue

If, as Veronika Valk believes, architectural design for kids is a “shortcut to the future of politics,” the same might be said for prison design.

Katherine Longhurst, Architect

Drawn to mathematics and art as a child, Katherine Longhurst saw architecture as the perfect intersection between the two. A partner in Sydney-based firm, Perumal Pedavoli, she specialises in the design of correctional facilities. The Bimberi Youth Justice Centre, situated north of Canberra, demonstrates Katherine’s sensitive integration of colour, texture, light, sustainability and functionality – with a particular emphasis on locks!

Underpinning the synthesis of functionality and aesthetics, is a humane philosophy of rehabilitation, which infuses her work and has helped the firm establish a niche reputation in Australia and New Zealand.

Katherine and I share a couple of things in common: we’ve both been to Jyväskylä in central Finland, the original home of famous Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto; and we both practise yoga.



“You have to draw on *sisu* to get through because the end result is worth it.”

Katherine Longhurst

While art still feeds Katherine’s imagination, the daily practice of architecture requires an attention to detail and the ability to manage multiple relationships in order the get the job done. It takes *sisu*, as Katherine describes in the following conversation.

Inspiration

Katherine Longhurst: Inspiration is a hard thing to pin down. There are so many influences and ways of looking at things that help develop your perception of the world.

For example, when I first saw Rosalie Gascoigne’s retrospective in Sydney ten years ago, I floated out of that exhibition. I was inspired by the

work. But you can’t then go and immediately translate that into architecture. What it does is make you think about proportion, materials and colour, and the idea of using things in unexpected ways.

My first overseas trip was to Italy. It was a great experience and when I got back I found myself designing all these Roman buildings, with courtyards and amphitheatres, big bold shapes. Louis Kahn and Alvar Aalto both had that reaction after studying in Italy. Aalto went back to Finland and started to design buildings with red bricks and terracotta imprinted on them, which hadn’t been seen in Finland before then. [con’td page 4](#)



Above: Bimberi Youth Justice Centre, Canberra
Top right: Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä, Finland

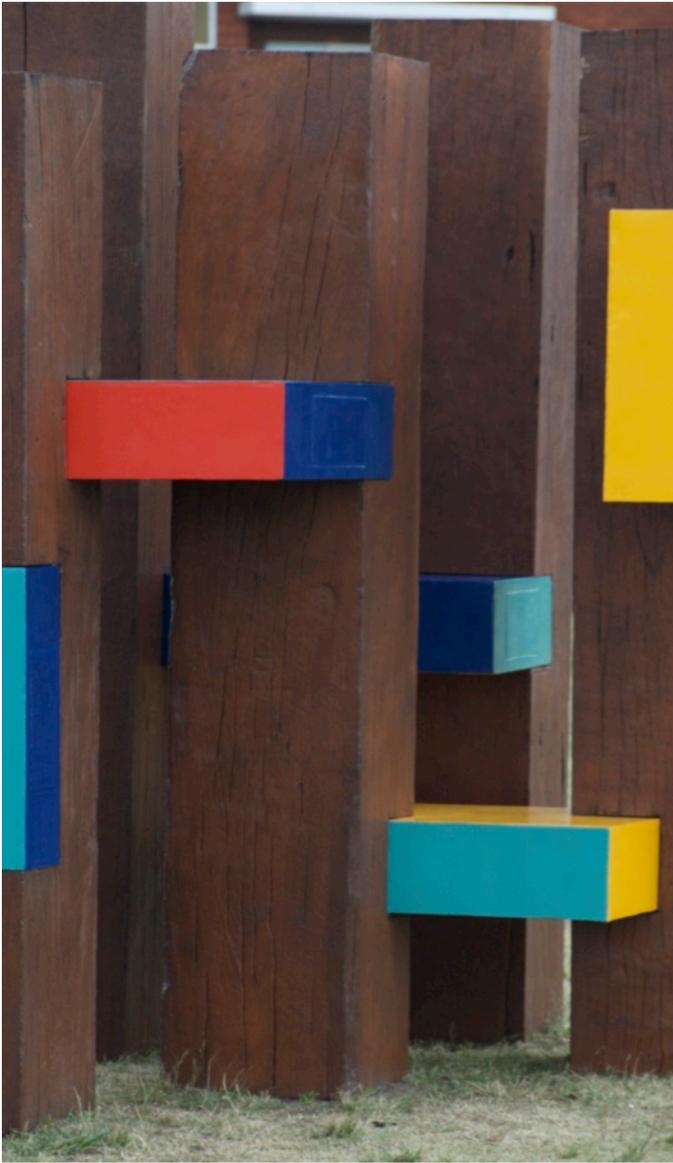
Daily sisu

AT: Let’s talk about sisu, that inner quality of keeping on going, finding a way through. What kind of challenges do you face where sisu might come into play?

KL: Writing a specification..or doing a door schedule! It’s a very important task. It’s part of the contract documents and if you have a well prepared specification you have fewer arguments with the builders later on, so life is easier. In the meantime, putting the specification together is really tedious. I’m writing a door schedule at

the moment, which is a list of all the doors in the project. It tells you what the door frame shape is like, what it will be made from - timber or steel; what the cladding will be on the outside - painted or another finish; eventually it will include information about the door hardware, locks, latches and door handles etc. Doors are really important and so are locks!

There are times when I think: “I am so bored, I just want to go home.” You have to draw on *sisu* to get through because the end result is worth it. ☹



“If you think about the kind of architecture Aalto was exposed to as a young person and what he would have studied at university, and then place that against the buildings he later designed – he was radical.”

Katherine Longhurst



The legacy of Alvar Aalto

Finland's quiet radical

Annie Talvé: There is a geographical affinity between them, as Kaban was born in Estonia, but their architecture is different, don't you think?

KL: Yes, but there is a strong geometric form they share and also their use of light.

AT: You must have been exposed to Aalto's work when you studied architecture, but what happened for you when you went to Finland and to Jyväskylä in particular?

KL: Aalto's buildings are really comfortable to be in, they have an accessible human quality to them. It's about light and that indoor-outdoor connection, but it's also about humility. The buildings, although beautiful in themselves, are not monumental, they're not trying to make a statement. And I think that's why they're nice to be in because there is a sense that they are there for people and not just to be admired as a sculpture, which some architecture can be.

If you think about the kind of architecture Aalto was exposed to as a young person and what he would have studied at university, and then place that against the buildings he later designed – he was radical. Where did those ideas come from?

AT: Even when he set up Artek with his first wife, Aino, and started making those gorgeous objects, they weren't meant to be just design objects, they were for people..

KL: Yes, they came from a functional requirement, a need to have furniture that was comfortable, that met a particular need for the people using a building and that was compatible with the building. They used materials respectfully and didn't waste anything.

AT: I also admire the way Aalto was inspired by what was happening with Bauhaus design in Germany and adapted plywood to create his own shapes by working closely with the same manufacturer for his whole working life. He was able to invent new shapes and new uses for those shapes.

Project Sisu Dialogue

continued from page 4

KL: That's right, he didn't just design, build it and that was it; it was a development process over many years. They refined their techniques to make things more accessible and easier to build. I actually visited the Korhonen furniture factory and they had placed some of the original Artek stools against the contemporary ones and were able to explain the differences.

AT: Like many creative people, Aalto was able to move between different genres. At the Aalto museum you can see the full range of his chairs and also his paintings. Buildings, furniture, art – he was restless in his need for self expression. Are you like that?

KL: I sew, I'm a dressmaker. I make all of my own clothes, I find it very therapeutic. I don't need any more clothes, I've got plenty, but I still keep going. I love the act of sewing. I remember when I was in Year 3 at school, we had a sewing teacher, Mrs Peters, who was very good at her job. Even the boys sewed things. My grandmother also taught me things and gave me my first sewing machine. Like anything, it takes time.

Architecture as art?

AT: You've got everything in your job, the creative and the detailed..

KL: Yes, and I like that. When I'm talking through the concept design with a client, I say: "We may be talking about this now but in a few months' time we're going to be talking about door handles." There are a lot of things to consider and if something goes wrong it's always the architect's fault! If it goes right, nobody mentions it.

AT: Philosopher, Elizabeth Grosz, describes architecture as the original art form. She says that the framing of space enables all other forms to emerge.....Is architecture an art?

KL: Some days, but it's only a small component. The creative spark is what makes architecture special, but it is only a small percentage of the time you spend as an architect. Most of it is about technology and technique and build-ability. I suppose the art is in the act of interpreting how people want to use the building, what will be done in it, translating their requirements into a three dimensional solution. And that flows through everything you do, you're always thinking about how it fits into the big picture. I think it is an unconscious process, it becomes a way of doing things.

AT: You're also managing a lot of relationships...

KL: Yes, it doesn't happen in isolation. The really good buildings, the ones we're happy with, are the ones where we've had a good connection with the client. Someone who has supported us or we have been able to support their objectives, we're working together collaboratively. If we want to do something a little bit different from the norm, they are then more confident about going with it.

Then as you're developing the three dimensional design, there are the engineers – structural, building services and mechanical engineers. It is challenging, especially working with mechanical engineers because they can't think in three dimensions. They have a very abstract idea of a building, the machines and ducts, but I don't think they can visualise the space they're putting those ducts into. So you have to be on your toes with them, to understand what it is they think they are doing and work out whether it will work or not. Then when you get to the construction phase, you deal with the builders – from the managing contractor to the brickie and the plumber.

We all work in different ways and it's really good to be able to distil the idea of something down to a simple concept to be able to explain it to people. If you look at the sketches we produce early on and compare them to the end result, you'll see a link, a continuity, but you won't necessarily be able to look at the very first drawing and say, yes, that's what we've ended up with. It doesn't work like that, except for Harry Seidler, apparently.

AT: And Frank Gebry. He often gets worried if the building strays too far from the original sketch. Tell me about Harry.

KL: I heard this story after Harry died. One of his partners said he went back to Vienna with Seidler to inspect the site for a residential building they were commissioned to do. Harry designed the building in the plane on the way back home to Australia. He did a sketch that addressed all the site and development constraints and expressed the idea he wanted to explore. It was all there, it was done. By that time he would have been in his mid-70s, so he had built a lot of buildings. I think that's important, it does take time to develop that kind of skill. It doesn't happen overnight.

One of our recent graduates was complaining about how boring it was to do door schedules and put numbers on drawings. She was told that everyone has to do it at some point. It's just part of learning about the process. You can't just do the inspirational parts of the process without knowing about the rest of it. ∞

References for Winter 2009

A perfect flower bed

ABC Radio National:

Art Works: Interview with Veronika Valk, 19 July, 2009

2005 Light Dome, Tallinn, Veronika Valk quote from:

www.justbrilliance.com

Project Sisu Dialogue

Interview with Katherine Longhurst conducted in April 2009.

Grosz, Elizabeth (2008), *Chaos, Territory, Art – Deleuze and the framing of the earth*, Columbia University Press, New York

Western, Richard (2005), *Alvar Aalto*, Phaidon, London



Photo: Howard Gwynne

PROJECTSISU

www.projectsisu.com



Annie Talvé
PO Box 487
Ashfield NSW 1800
Australia