Remains of the Soviet Past in Estonia

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The past as a rotting place

Waste and forgetting

There was no war, but countless ruins, waste and brokenness were produced. Abandoned industries, rusting machinery, obsolete power plants, decaying buildings, chemically polluted zones, environmental catastrophes and debris have, for decades, symbolised the collapse of the USSR, displaying the break-up of the regime in its more literary and material sense. This gives the impression that communism, toxicity and the production of waste cannot be separated, and produces a physical abjection towards that era and all that it meant. Soon after its breakdown, the Soviet world was described as wasteful, symbolically polluted and economically out of order, the consequences of the ‘collapse’ being inseparable from the sociomaterial effects of the Soviet regime. As a rotting reality (Stoler 2013), the socialist inheritance was automatically associated with inefficient practices, hazardous products, empty spaces and a sense of ending, activating an imaginary elimination.

Anthropologist James Ferguson (1999) defines this kind of adjustment as an ‘infrastructural abjection’, which designates certain aspects of social life as residual, beyond institutional care, expelled, thrown down and humiliated. The ‘abject’ refers to something that simultaneously generates a somatic and symbolic reaction, appearing in a state of cast-off, violating the clean and proper, and perceived as an external menace from which one would like to keep a distance, which is a seemingly impossible task (Kristeva 1997). Mary Douglas (1966) explained how waste and dirt might be connected with the processes of ordering. Hence, the concept of waste is part physical, part social, and involves classification and separation – reinforcing the positioning within and outside a systemic organisation. As described by Douglas, the constitution of waste has two
phases: first, the categorisation of what does not fit and rejection due to its being ‘out of place’; and second, a process of dissolving any characterisation (rotting), which utterly leads to its disintegration and loss of identity.

Waste is therefore categorised within a frame of value that relates to temporal regimes and the constitution of cycles – profit and loss, use and abandonment, and life and death. Any valuation and generation of waste is the result of contested human decisions, whether in the form of social relations (Gregson 2007) or as a reminder of the processes of modernisation – when the good, useful and valuable have been already taken (Scanlan 2005). Designations of waste are enmeshed in relations of power and domination, as people are incited to make moral and political judgements based on associations with dirt (Alexander and Reno 2012; Martínez 2017c; McKee 2015). The term refers to whatever needs to be expelled so the system continues to function, to all that is meant to be concealed and hidden, lying in a transitional state, ready for disappearance and yet ripe for reinvestment, reinterpretation or revaluation (Thompson 1979).

The Latin etymology of the word goes back to vastus – meaning deserted, unoccupied or desolate, a space that is void and appears uncultivated. However, waste also has other meanings, such as missed opportunities and dilapidated time and resources, being part of a process of disqualification as well as a trigger for self-assessment (Pardo 2010). Waste and society are mutually constitutive through ‘waste regimes’ (Gille 2007), being part of a larger set of epistemological assumptions, norms and social conventions. Different relations to waste indicate different relations to profit, thus revealing shifting cultural values and processes of world making. Still, waste always occupies the negative side in dichotomies such as efficiency and inefficiency, usefulness and uselessness, order and disorder and alive and dead (Gille 2007, 20). Waste has been also taken as a remainder of withdrawals and extractions, propelling the mind backwards when an object was in full usefulness. An example of this is the Garbology project (1996), whereby William Rathje investigated fresh garbage as if it were archaeological evidence, studying consumer behaviours from the material realities they leave behind rather than from self-reports.

A study of the discarded and the dissipated reveals gaps in the prevailing narrative of evolution and progress. As pointed out by Benjamin (1968), debris calls out to be recognised in the present, moving into the future while looking backwards – with a reverse gaze. Disposal has also been described as simply a way of ‘moving things along’ (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe 2007), a dynamic which can lead to unexpected afterlives,
revalorisations and reappropriations by different people. Even if legacies become waste, they might retain the potential for redemption through social, economic or political change, reminding us that anything occupying the site of disgust at one moment in history is not necessarily disgusting at the preceding or subsequent ones (Laporte 2000, 32).

Damnatio memoriae

To understand the articulation of collective memory, it is important to pay attention to what one forgets; not simply to what is erased, but also to what is made inaccessible, silenced or reduced to waste. Past things are forgotten not simply by erasure, but also by excluding them from the agenda. Further, they are made invisible by situating both the remnants and the related narratives out of place and with no possible circulation, thus constituting a refusal to let someone enter into the past and preventing new generations from establishing direct contact with its remnants. As pointed out by local art historian Andres Kurg (2006a), attempts to forget the fifty-year-long Soviet period in Estonia as though it never existed have inadvertently denied people’s personal memories. Also, anthropologist Sigrid Rausing identified three aspects of the ‘social amnesia’ about the Soviet world: the intentional lack of transmission of memories between the generations, the suppression of practices to which social memories are intricately linked, and an ‘organised oblivion’ of the state – promulgating a fallacious version of history (2004, 93).

My research draws attention to anomalies in the actual classification of past experiences and things. This compelled me to be sensitive to the way that the past intervenes in the present and is still resonant in the built environment and local people. During the last decades, Estonian society experienced the dismantlement and destruction of the recent old (the Soviet past), invoked by a nonrecent old – the first Republic in the interwar period on which the state bases its legitimacy and builds institutions. The long historical episodes when foreign forces occupied the country were thus presented as exceptions, instead articulating narratives that highlighted the short experience of independence and downplayed the foreign domination. To a great extent, this narrative was articulated through an active dismissal of all that was inherited from the previous regime (as if the Soviet organisation of society could be simply dismantled and replaced), a mnemonic silence and retrieval-induced forgetting meant to influence how individuals and groups remember the past (Anderson, Bjork and Bjork 1994).
The past is not simply there: it has to be collected, articulated and maintained to become memory (Young 1993). Hence, the past may be activated, forgotten, embodied or neglected depending on political goals, such as rebuilding the new Estonian state. The construction of new exclusions and separations is specific to any regime change (in the attempt to establish a new hegemony); yet, the degree of vengeance or the narrowness in the purity may vary. It is the labour of the negative, the oscillation between the old and the new, between presence and absence, that constitutes the memory space of postsocialism (Bach 2017).

As Inge Melchior notes in her dissertation (2015), the official history of Estonia was built on family life stories, while countermemories were perceived as threatening the homogeneity of the society and the independence of the state. Further on, in her study of the ‘threshold generation’, sociologist Raili Nugin agrees that the delegitimisation of the Soviet era was ‘needed’ in the 1990s. Nugin adds that the ‘black-and-white version’ of the past changed in the 2000s when an alternative narrative emerged, indulging in details without challenging the hegemonic treatment of the Soviet time: ‘Yet the already established dominant narrative was too strong to be questioned, as that would have meant questioning the political base structures of the entire society’ (Nugin 2015, 126). In a similar vein, historian Marek Tamm describes this articulation of memory politics as an ‘ideology of restoration’, according to which all measures (in their legal, institutional, commemorative and monumental dimensions) were dedicated to restoring prewar traditions, institutions and national romanticist models. Eventually, such reactivation of the patterns of nineteenth-century historiography led to ‘the massive restoration of monuments to the War of Independence, the reinstating of prewar place, town, street and house names, the re-institution of old anniversaries, or the reinterment of politicians in their homeland from the interwar independence period’ (Tamm 2013, 654).

Postsocialist transformations in Estonia have been driven in reference to the past, with 1991 marking the inaugural, teleologically constructed event. These changes involved the revival of the imaginary of the interwar Republic, relegating memories and visions of Soviet modernity to removal or oblivion. Indeed, the Estonian state is officially presented as a legal continuity with the first independence period (1918–1940). The subsequent process of the restitution of properties to the prewar owners was thus fundamental for the legitimisation of the new state, correcting the errors of history and symbolically meaning the negation of the Soviet past. The new was therefore reconstituted with reference to history and preoccupation with the past, using terms such as ‘cleaning’ and ‘leaving
behind’ socialist remains. As a result, the Soviet past has been reduced by
the current political power to a one-dimensional stigmatised experience
that has been institutionally displayed as a ‘prolonged rupture’ (Kõresaar
2005), ‘culturally alien’ and unnatural (Feldman 2001). Yet, using the
Soviet period as a constitutive outside led to the demonisation of all ele-
ments connected to the recent past, presenting it as Russian and brutal in
contraposition to the harmonic and familiar first Republic (Kattago 2009).

The Soviet world, with its visions, expectations, tempos, skills and
material culture, suddenly became something obsolete, excremental and
wasteful, and soon turned into a toxic prelude to what came after. Accord-
ingly, the ideas, people and materialities associated with it were consid-
ered dispensable, in need of recycling, or even of exorcism.1 Postsocialist
processes were mostly driven by negative retrospective assessments and
destruction under the assumption of ‘what the past does to us’ (Olick
2007). The Soviet past was thus classified in anomalous ways by a historical
revisionism based on the postsocialist moral and political agenda. It is
even possible to make a parallel between postsocialism and a therapy of
psychoanalysis in which the past appears as something that threatens –
in terms of a burden.2

In Estonia, memories and representations of the past have been
reconstructed in the light of subsequent events, often showing an ‘arrog-
ant and disgusting attitude towards things emanating from the socialist
era’ (Lobjakas and Paulus 2000, 9). The Soviet past might have suffered
a damnatio memoriae, a group of processes of destruction, erasure and
silence that were applied in the Roman Empire to assault the memory of
a fallen enemy. When a damnatio memoriae was issued, an array of official
and unofficial sanctions was practised to erase all historical references
to that person; monuments were defaced and the name of the damned
was scratched from the history books. Yet, the ‘condemnation of memory’
was a complex exercise beyond erasure, allowing people to see the sup-
posedly removed name on the stone, drawing attention to acts of removal
and creating a stigma that might last through generations through a pre-
served disrepair (Flower 2006; Varner 2004).3

Active negligence

Often things fail partially, but the Soviet Union collapsed completely in
one fell swoop, with 1991 appearing as a year of massive and sudden obso-
lescence. A major cultural and civilisational break was supposed to happen
then, and many things and life stories were consigned to oblivion,
unworthy of maintenance or recollection; some others remained, yet were recontextualised as improper and impure, as a wrecked entity living in another time (Fabian 1983). The Soviet Union was a great producer of premature ruins, derelict factories, bunkers, and redundant mining and military towns; all that was transformed into a testimony of modern debris with the arrival of postsocialism and late modernity.

Negligence is not a natural process but rather part of a strategy of disqualifying something. On the one hand, abandonment and negligence are the products of particular decisions, of attentions and inattentions, subjected to practices of maintenance and use, or disinvestment. On the other, disrepair has working effects that not only supports state legibility (Chu 2014; Scott 1998), but also conditions broader political sensibilities (Rancière 2006). Drawing on the assumption that discourses have also a material life, I foreground how postsocialist processes have relied on specific strategies of value creation and degradation. Such processes generate ‘orders of worth’ (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) that contribute to creating and maintaining the legitimacy of institutions and sustain the arrangement of things. When we engage with our surroundings and participate in society, we already carry an order of seeing, which conditions who can take part and in which way people can participate. Jacques Rancière (2006) conceptualised this order as ‘forms of visibility’ and the ‘distribution of the sensible’, referring to a legitimisation of certain ways of seeing, acting, speaking and being in public.4

The way legacies are treated makes evident how a society engages with difference. The framing of legacies appears as a sociocultural process of identity formation and belonging, often presented as a family affair and directly influenced by those who are related to and surrounding us. Frames and delineations emplace things in the present; however, the assessment is always circumstantial, made by people in a given context and based on particular trajectories of appropriation and discard. Any classification of waste and heritage is a dynamic process, not a static system, and is thus subject to changes and movements between categories. They both establish a particular continuity with the past, however, while a legacy is there (to be acknowledged or disregarded), heritage has to be ‘made up’ out of heterogeneous layers and changing regimes.

The categorisation of something as heritage is entangled in multiple factors and qualified by a present system of values. In this vein, Kevin Hetherington (2004) observes that disposal and inheritance are not as far apart as might initially be imagined; they both produce a trace effect that is passed on. A legacy functions as a link between past, present and future, compelling one to negotiate persistent ontologies and learn historical
lessons (Kattago 2009a). However, legacies can be interpreted as both negative and positive – either as an inheritance or as residual, a mercy or a burden (Kattago 2012). Legacies are not always wasted because of being unsuitable for functioning and lacking a role in the system; further, the wasting of the inherited is not necessarily produced through its use, but rather, by neglect. Thus, wasting is also a judgement (not simply a process), and as such, it is prone to vary culturally and generationally.

In Latin, the verb legare (to send) serves as the origin of two different nouns: legatus, which means a delegation or an authorised representative, and legatum, which refers to anything that is left behind by a predecessor (e.g., money, a property, cultural heritage or descendants); hence, legatum requires a process of transmission and the existence of an ancestor. Thinking carefully, legitimacy and legacy are not that far from each other, semantically and orthographically. Indeed, one needs a legacy to legitimate power, and one has to have some legitimacy in order to access what has been passed down. It is in this sense that we can also talk of wasted legacies as aborted pathways or purged symbology, thereby referring to situations in which there is presence but no acknowledgement of value, appearing therefore as discontinuity or dissonance instead of a direct correlation between outcome and antecedent. We can also talk of remnants that persist over the duration of people’s lives, occupying multiple historical tenses. A remnant refers to the pieces, fragments and scraps that are left unused and whose value is partly lost. Nonetheless, it differs from waste and ruin; whilst waste carries notions of judgement, remnants are stripped of negative connotations, without reaching, however, ruins’ ability to tell stories and express the dimension of time (Marini and Corbellini 2016).

In their traces and remnants, wasted legacies appear as a tangible manifestation of how the past has been represented and integrated into the present. The wasting of a legacy exemplifies a strategy orchestrated to turn an inheritance into something useless, strange and uncomfortable. Accordingly, the hardships of building a neoliberal market economy (the so-called transition) have been attributed to Soviet ‘wastefulness’ and ‘intrinsic failure’, presented as the cost of decades of communism (Pop-Eleches 2007). This follows a logic of sacrifice, making it ‘necessary’ for a bigger goal, infusing the destruction of value with other values (Bataille 1998). Sacrifices were thus presented as necessary in order to clean Soviet residuals and move back to the future (through a more distant past, paradoxically: the first interwar Republic). During the last twenty-five years, many postsocialist outcomes have been blamed on communist legacies, whether as an after-effect or as the reason that justifies an actual replacement. In both cases, the past is approached according to present
circumstances. The difference relies on its interpretation as something that is or is not still convenient.

Negligence may arise either from acting carelessly or from failing to act when needed; hence, it is a failure to act and to preserve. As legacies often need a linking mechanism (Wittenberg 2015), the wasting of the inherited can be understood as the product of failed relationships and institutional inactivity, dematerialising a given past and turning it invisible in order to materialise a new historical regime (Buchli and Lucas 2002a). Forgetting is a complex process, which affects localities by making things anonymous and invisible (Connerton 2009). In this light, any interpretation of the recent past is a politically engaged act, which requires the inclusion of remains and marginalised actors teetering uncertainly between ruination and renovation (Buchli and Lucas 2002a).

Heritage is selected but legacies are not optional; they do not refer simply to the cared-for past, but also to involuntary transmissions and the unwanted baggage. Wasted legacy refers to something inherited that has not been fully used or developed, implying missed opportunities and neglected potential. This term helps to conceptualise processes, whereby the relationship between the inherited and coeval agency is not resolved, reminding us that the potential or life expectancy of things, buildings and skills is often not fulfilled because of social decisions rather than natural, historic processes. In order to explore the materiality and the stories that reside at the intersection of the present and the absent, the research requires paying special attention to the temporal regimes and traces that survived.

A wasted legacy is not simply something inherited that has very little economic or symbolic value, or that is no longer in use in the present; the wasting of a legacy indicates a shifting memory and a rupture in historical time (Koselleck [1979] 2004). It refers thus to beginnings without proper endings, to premature deaths and abortive effects from an external cause. However, wasted legacies have the ability to resist and to respond to human agency, waiting for a moment of recognition and redemption. I noticed, for instance, that the material inheritance from the Soviet world decays at a different tempo from the evolution of values within Estonian society; this quality and generational changes provide another chance for past things, and demonstrates that wasted legacies do not follow straight trajectories of destruction.

It might be that the USSR was not mature enough for the collapse – a condition that would have enabled a more gracious layering down of its legacies. We might also distinguish between static and dynamic legacies, depending on whether they remain embedded in the past, as carriers
of history that emanate lasting effects, or they appear alienated from their past self. The distinct duration of remnants allows us to work on recuperation, remembrance and attachment through the practices of repair, maintenance and curation. Those who come after have to deal with what is left, with the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities and things (Stoler 2013). Wasted legacies are those that endured despite having been reduced to zero value, influencing social structures through obduracies and relational effects, residually left over but in a state of unfinished deposition, and standing in potential for multiple forms of reconstitution. Still, something can be repaired only if it is actually available and accessible, even if only in the form of waste or ruin. The physical degradation of Soviet legacies poses a challenge to their preservation and to an in-depth understanding of people’s historical experience. Hence, a crucial issue in the study of these legacies is how the subsequent generation accepts, rejects or is indifferent to what is given.

It is not only the act of forgetting, but memory has also been used in the neglecting. Wasted legacies refer to much of the infrastructure and many of the buildings that, despite remaining perfectly functional, were either demolished, recycled or left to decay, in the sense of an active negligence supported by official narratives. For Nietzsche, the need to forget is a mandatory complement to remembering. That approach takes forgetting not as a failure of memory but as an affirmation, a way to fix up our hauntings. Forgetting can also be approached as a faculty and as a symbolic expenditure, liberating negativism, accessing other ways to knowledge (Forty and Küchler 1999). A precedent for this was the first postwar Europe, built upon forgetting as a way of life. However, since 1989, Europe has been constructed upon a compensatory surplus of memory (Judt 2005). Otherwise, empowerment through historic grievance is a source of division and confrontation, as well as a reluctant sign to search for compromises (Black 2008).

**Official vandalism**

At the Tallinn Architectural Biennale of 2013 (‘Recycling Socialism’), the architects in attendance spoke of prefab panel construction housing as a problem, not simply presenting modernist structures of the 1970s and 1980s as having lower status but also discussing whether it was necessary, in order for society to move on, to demolish structures and buildings that represented the Soviet ideology, thereby assessing the material inheritance from this regime as residual. Destruction precedes most construction. The
making of the new always implies that the old is to be torn apart, not simply because building is dependent on the demolition or dismantling of something else, but also because it is the destruction of the predecessor that allows for the realisation of a new state or plan, affirming the power of the victor ‘to the same extent as the erection of a monument to victory’ (Yampolsky 1995, 100).

These interdependent processes of construction and demolition are constitutive of a particular urban materiality, whereby the object of memory politics is both spatial and temporal (Schwenkel 2013). For instance, in the attempt to construct new historical narratives, several Soviet landmarks have been sacrificed, or dissected, in Tallinn, so that we have seen impressive buildings torn down to make space for shopping malls (e.g., Sakala keskus) or privatised to undergo an experiment in architectural taxidermy (Postimaja, Teenindusmaja, and so on). Some others linger on as remnants, since international heritage organisations did not allow their demolition against the wishes of the city hall (e.g., Linnahall). Around them, trash often accumulates as a result of official disregard, a situation which is later used by real estate companies as an excuse for a speculative type of redevelopment or privatisation, along with discourses of ‘having potential’ and ‘wasted space’ (Martínez 2017c).

The most recent sacrifice has been the Ministry of Finance, built in 1978 by the architect Ülo Ilves to host the planning committee for computing. The building is regarded as bearing the first work of public abstract art created on a façade, made by the artist Edgar Viies. The officials’ original idea was to renovate the existing building; however, claims were made about the low quality of the construction materials, which led the real estate company to propose demolishing the building to rebuild it again. In the end, a competition for a new ‘super ministry’ office complex (a site of 14,420 square metres, hosting four ministries) was organised, the project chosen being a glass building topped with the three lions that symbolise the power of the new state (figure 1.1). The decision to demolish the old building ignored the architects’ union advice to preserve the historical building as ‘an architecturally valuable monument of its era’. Reflecting on how the obsolescence of buildings is neither inevitable nor natural, local artist Leonhard Lapin (2015) notes that functional buildings can hardly last more than three decades in the centre of Tallinn, adding that ‘the fact that the house was built during the Soviet occupation does not mean it is worthless’.

The previous case of ‘vandalism’ against the modernist legacy was the Central Post Office, which was nonetheless subjected to a different sort of sacrifice (or afterlife?). The Central Post Office (Postimaja) was built
between 1977 and 1980 on the eve of the Moscow Olympic Games, for which a regatta was scheduled on the outskirts of the Estonian capital. The main function of the building was to host mail processing and local telephone services, while long-distance calls were also available through an operator on the first floor of the building (figures 1.2 and 1.3). A distinctive, three-storey limestone construction replaced an old gas station, symbolically connecting the Rottermann quarter with the old town and the Narva highway.

Fig. 1.1 Façade of the ‘super ministerium’ in Tallinn. Source: Tõnu Tunnel, 2017.
Fig. 1.2  Postimaja, 1985. Source: Harald Leppikson, Rahvusarhiivi filmiarhiiv.

Fig. 1.3  Postimaja interior, 1985. Source: Harald Leppikson, Rahvusarhiivi filmiarhiiv.
The Central Post Office had the first escalator in Estonia, and people came from all over the country to see it and experience the ride. However, the escalator soon broke down, and was definitively replaced by a conventional staircase in 1988. While researching the nuances of the Postimaja, I discovered that my father-in-law, Silver Agu, was the person in charge of its repair and maintenance between 1990 and 2001, fixing problems in the building’s health like a surgeon (figure 1.4). Indeed,
Silver was very glad to recall details of the everyday maintenance of the building, showing photographs and confiding the personal affection he had developed for the Central Post Office. For him, to work there was something to be proud of. When asked if the building was designed to accommodate obsolescence and allow adaptive reuse, Silver replied by dwelling not only on the architecture’s temporality but also on its financial utility:

In its time, in the 80s, it was an elegant building. But now, surrounded by other buildings, such as the hotel and the cinema, it loses its presence. Back then it had sufficient space around it; however, the director of Postimaja had to sell part of the territory because of the constant need for money. By selling the surrounding area, they made the building dysfunctional. . . . In its original context the building was majestic, but being surrounded, it lost the perspective from where to look at it.

Looking back, Silver correlates the restoration of Estonian independence with the invisible hand of the market economy and an increase of building technology, in contrast with the ‘sloppy finish of the Soviet era and the Communist system’. Furthermore, he found a tension between the preservation and rehabilitation of functioning buildings, arguing that it is not as simple as retrofitting Postimaja using some new technology, but that it would have required extending the life of an economic system, spatial structure and society at large that are already dead. When asked if the right maintenance would have been sufficient to keep the building in a suitable state nowadays, Silver answered:

Yes. However, the building was made with bad materials and a weak foundation. The concrete pillars and beams had to be reinforced to gain bearing capacity. . . . Postimaja made sense in the context of its function; for the current cityscape, the building is better now.

Many of the architectural and industrial ruins of Tallinn are not simply Soviet but also material signifiers of the decline of Fordism and neoliberal policies. For instance, the innovations brought by information technologies led to structural changes in mail and communication industries during recent decades, gradually reducing the volume of traditional mail. But it was the privatisation process and the need for self-financing that forced the Estonian Post to sell practically all the real estate properties.
they owned, keeping just four of ninety they had in the 1990s. Since 2005, the building has been under heritage protection, so its demolition is formally forbidden. However, the new owners started a complete ‘building surgery’ (Harris 1999) that changed the façade, interior and use of the Postimaja, and it is now transformed into a shopping mall with a glossy crystal façade and numerous advertisements: ‘It is not the same building’, argues Silver, ‘only the form and size were preserved’.

In March 2015, I conducted twelve informal interviews next to the building, asking random passers-by: ‘What do you think about the current shape and use of the Postimaja?’ The answers could be divided into four groups. The first group criticised it, complaining that there were enough shopping malls and Rimi (supermarkets), with too many Soviet buildings of Tallinn lost in recent years. The second group comprised those who were favourable to the changes, because there was ‘finally an affordable supermarket in the city centre’ (most of them were elderly people who would come by tram, take a walk in the old town and then buy something in the Rimi). The third group was composed of those who were indifferent, with the fourth group forming the majority of participants who were glad that something had been done with the building. For instance, Toni stated, ‘It looked bad. Now it is very good again. You know, fresh, renovated. The façade is preserved as it was in the Russian time’. Or Eve, who commented, ‘It was unique, but in a very bad shape; terrible shape. I guess something had to be done and there was no chance to keep it how it was. About the shopping mall . . . perhaps a shopping mall was not the best, but at least it was not demolished as the Sakala Keskus was. Shopping malls are the spirit of the time!’ There is nonetheless a fifth group of opinion that I did not reach in my interviews: those who believe that the H&M now in the old post office allows them to dress like the rest of the world.

Architectural taxidermy

There is a tradition of skilled taxidermists in Eastern Europe, yet architectural taxidermy is also a unique phenomenon in the region, showing not simply the fate of modernist architecture and industrial heritage, but also the ongoing relational and processual materialisation of urban settings and life. The term ‘taxidermy’ itself derives from the Greek: taxi meaning ‘movement’ and derma meaning ‘skin’. If they were not considered to embody Soviet ideology, modernist buildings would be hunting trophies, specimens which, through the act of dissecting and freezing from
the effects of time, could achieve an outward look of the past and an authenticity, an organic appearance attractive for touristification and investors. However, the political infection of past things leads to a deeper degree of emptying and dissecting, beyond design logics of redressing what is raw or naked.

As with displays, the emptying of buildings allows new forms of representation of the past, redefinitions in the present, and alternative visions for the future (Marcoux 2001). However, the emptying projects and architectural taxidermy seek less and less to render buildings as lifelike, or to imitate reality; rather, new projects show a preference for enhancement and for a perfected nature (van Dijck 2001), making buildings look as if they were not made but born (Haraway 1984). Besides sending the social world that they represented into oblivion, an important feature of the architectural taxidermy practised in postsocialist cities is that the buildings-creatures were often not dead before the taxidermy, but functioned well even if they were lacking sustained investment and maintenance (i.e., Kreenholm).

Buildings can give and receive; they are performative, they also happen. The opposite of architectural taxidermy, which removes the human voice and warmth from the architectural skin, is to honour maturing buildings with occupation, repair and maintenance work, a form of warming them up, as physical, historical, political and financial bodies. An example of this is the rediscovery of the Tallinn energy plant, next to Linnahall, or more precisely the creation of the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM) and its organic development, which has now gone on for more than ten years. The EKKM is a nonprofit exhibition venue established in late 2006, when artists looking for studio space started squatting in the office building of the former boiler plant. The museum gained convenient institutional stability in 2011, as a consequence of the increase in the number of visitors to the shoreline that the programme of the European Capital of Culture brought. Yet as a side effect, a detailed plan has been prepared by the city hall to privatise all the area surrounding the museum, because of the gentrification of the neighbourhood and allegedly the need to pay for KultuuriKatel (the so-called Creative Hub), the big iconic project of the European Capital of Culture (opened three years after the event), whose costs put the survival of the museum directly at risk.

In November 2017, artist Kirill Tulin presented in EKKM Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler, an installation-performance inviting the audience ‘to imagine together what public spaces we want in winter and how we could claim and maintain them’ (figures 1.5 and 1.6). For a period of one month, and organised into seven separate shifts (a 24-hour
Fig. 1.5  Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler, project, 2017. Source: Kirill Tulin.

Fig. 1.6  Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler, project, 2017. Source: Author.
A workday followed by a three-day break, ‘сутки через трое’), the museum was kept open and warm, day and night, by the stoker-artist and his successive helpers. I had the pleasure of acting as a helper, warming the building and acting as a host for discussions among the nearly 50 people who came to visit the space during my shift. The project created a thermal communicative condition (Robinson 2015), transforming the museum into a platform for thought-making. In a way, this project echoes Mierle Ukeles’s Maintenance Art, which involved shaking hands with each of the 8,500 sanitation workers of New York, expressing words of gratitude to them, or inviting people to perform their regular duties as art. ‘My working will be the work’, declared Ukeles.

The bench-like structure built by Kirill in the entrance room was a reflection onto the floor of the shape of the load-bearing ceiling. This bench worked as a giant radiator, with hot water tubes inside, transforming the exhibition into a tepidarium by hidden pipes from an adjacent boiler-room (a design which restores the premuseum plan, locating a shower box in the corners where it once was). The heating fuel came from the wood material left from the museum’s previous exhibitions. Besides functioning as a form of research on its own, the exhibition had several layers of cultural and material archaeology. For instance, Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler borrows its title from a book found in what would later become EKKM, when the building was ‘rediscovered’ in 2006 (figure 1.7). That manual was written in the early seventies to provide the technical instructions to heat the Tallinn power plant. Otherwise, the figure of the stoker has particular connotations in the former Soviet Union – as the embodiment of idleness, lack of ambition and inappropriate behaviour, a redundant drunk wasting time (although many were highly educated), the lowest social position in official accounts; and yet, the freest possible job for young artists, poets and musicians, allowing for a space of autonomy, a chosen peripherality, being simultaneously inside and outside the system.8

Another important layer of the exhibition is that Kirill provided a space where visitors could spend time and exchange thoughts, a simple service which, however, appears critical and subversive due to the fact that physical public spaces are shrinking in Tallinn while the privatised commercial ones are overwhelmingly rising. We can relate this to the phenomenon of architectural taxidermy, as well as to the decreasing lives of buildings for speculation purposes, the actual politics of memory and revanchist urban planning, which has resulted in recent buildings being rapidly devalued, thought unworthy of investment and finally made expendable. Hence the question of which buildings are ‘worth’ preserving
and which are architecturally, historically and culturally ‘worthless’ strongly echoes social considerations and values.

The above-mentioned urban plan also intends to demolish the building and privatise the plot adjacent to EKKM – pertaining to the same energy complex. Due to the negligence of the building (a storage room and infrastructure supplying coal for the surrounding plant), artists, scholars and students worked together for months in 2013 repairing the ceiling, paving the floor and reinstalling electricity in the space. Then they opened an exhibition space called Gallery of the Installation, Photography and Sculpture Departments of the Estonian Academy of Arts (ISFAG) (figure 1.8), where young artists and curators can organise alternative shows.

In October 2014, I co-curated a site-specific meta-exhibition in ISFAG, I Looked into the Walls and Saw . . . , which refrained from physical intervention in the gallery. The curatorial act consisted of inviting 20 participants to identify and interpret diverse physical qualities of the space, reflecting on the space as if it were a sculpture, an installation or a painting in its own right. The artworks of the show were the patina of the former energy plant precariously transformed into a gallery, making entropy visible and enabling the building to respond to physical and social
time. Artworks themselves were found as leftovers and subject to disintegration: limestone bricks from different eras, mushrooms incrusted within rocks, pipes, insulation foam, holes, water puddles, walled-in windows, metal remains, codes written on the walls and changing weather conditions were some of the main exhibits on show, as signs of age that accumulate on both the surface and the intestines of the space (figure 1.9).

The exhibition concept built upon curators’ experience of visiting previous shows at the ISFAG, when they were unable to distinguish between exhibited art objects and the walls and floors of the gallery. For the show, anthropologist Patrick Laviolette chose to write about a dark corner situated at the very end of the exhibition area. To observe this space, visitors had to open a door to a musty, dank black room, which had a hole at the bottom of a fake wall that blocked their sight and passage into the very end of the coal loading tunnel. Architect Toomas Tammis made a list of all the loose stuff present in the gallery, the detached things that appear as changeable and that lie outside regulations (two brooms, for example, the telescopic tube of a vacuum cleaner or a foldable ladder). Other contributions approached material decay as an act of
communication similar to graffiti, as shown by street artist MinaJaLydia. Architecture historian Ingrid Ruudi reflected on how the labour of art workers is to sustain zones of unconventional critical thinking, which also includes Sisyphean tasks such as drying the floor of the gallery or repairing holes in the roof. Ruudi brought to the debate Ukeles’s *Maintenance Art* and the original meaning of the term ‘curating’ – to take care of – concluding: ‘A non-profit gallery as a commerce-free zone of exchanging ideas is made possible by someone initiating it, maintaining it, taking care of it. Sweeping up the water from the floor. Doing it voluntarily, out of enthusiasm, largely unpaid’.

Also we can refer to the choice of anthropologist Franz Krause, who wrote: ‘These pipes are not supposed to be here. They are just passing through. They are hidden, where possible, behind a makeshift plywood facade. And they are insulated with thick sheets of material, so as not to

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**Fig. 1.9** One of the many scars present at the exhibition space, ISFAG. Source: Author, 2014.
reveal any of the riches they carry, on the way from somewhere to elsewhere. Much like this room itself, they are not made for loitering, but as corridors – spaces to hurry through on the road to a proper destination. They connect points, a point of origin and a target point; and this connection has to be as smooth, fast, as frictionless as possible and to deliver all the content in its original state, unadulterated by the journey’.

Topographies of political cleansing

The transformation of cityscapes has provided the ground for former Soviet republics to reestablish themselves as nation-states, mobilising architecture and urban planning in the service of social change, constructing pasts and futures through the built environment (Boym 1994; Khalvashi 2015; Laszczkowski 2016; Molnár 2013; Ojari 2012). On a symbolic level, a historical rush appeared to erase any physical representations of the Soviet era from the city centres; new monuments, street names, museums and historical narratives quickly emerged and the old stigmatised ones were forced out from the urban landscape. Such extensive reorchestration of official memory through the redesign of urban surfaces and newly commissioned monuments followed a spatial pursuit of legitimacy (Buchli 2007), turning postsocialist cities into an overwritten palimpsest in which the hidden was as meaningful as the exposed (Oushakine 2009). Indeed, to clean the old iconography and symbolically reappropriate the space within the city centres was just the first stage of a wider process driven by the removal, rediscovery and recreation. As an important part of this phenomenon, the past was reconsidered and history reinvented, not simply to create a new community or legitimise the new government, but also to attract investors, customers and tourists.

Probably the best example of the discursive reappropriation of Tallinn is Vabaduse Väljak (Freedom Square). This plaza was reconstructed in 2008 to function as a stitching point of Estonian national identity, yet the site has had several manifestations during its history, hosting a 5 metre monument to Peter the Great under the Russian empire, and then being called Victory Square (Võidu Väljak) (figure 1.10) during the Soviet time and used as a parking lot. Recently, it has been rebuilt and packed with memory symbols (the Liberty Cross and the Memory Column), hence turned into a lieu de mémoire (Nora 1989). In the framework of the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia, the Ministry of Defence decided to erect a 23.5 metre glass pillar reproducing the ‘Cross of Liberty’.
(a military award of 1919) in a prominent site of the plaza (figure 1.11). The monument was proposed not to address the idea of democratic liberties but to promote freedom as the outcome of a war, and it gained the opposition of many locals, especially architects and artists. For instance, architect Karli Luik argues that ‘aesthetically, the monument definitely does not belong to the 21st, or even to the 20th century, but rather to the 19th century . . . it is out of proportion and leads to misunderstandings’; while Daniel Raudsepp, head of the nearby Art Hall, shares that ‘this official monument is hard to explain when we receive foreign visitors’.9

Unexpectedly, an attempt to fix this misconception emerged in the Estonian capital when the final decision was taken. Then, hundreds of white posters with the text ‘VABADUS’ (Freedom) appeared in the public space of Tallinn overnight, inviting the passers-by to share their understanding of freedom and to express their opinion about the design of the new square. The posters were announcing a contest to find out the best solution to the public debate concerning ‘Freedom’. The intention of this anonymous poster action was not entirely obvious, with the media’s first speculation being that this was some kind of advertisement campaign. In the empty space of the posters some people used the opportunity to express their opinion about the Cross of Liberty, while some others just
wrote dirty words. Authorities, however, immediately criminalised the freedom posters.

In October 2017, another polemical debate emerged around the use and design of Freedom Square, after the decision of the state to prevent young people from skating on the site, blaming them for making noise, breaking the city furniture and not respecting the past. Yet, as Hannes Praks, professor of Interior Architecture pointed out, the unwelcoming of young people in Freedom Square was a serious strategic mistake by the government, distancing the youth from the rest of the society and generating negative affects. I agree with him that the key problem is not that claims against skaters are false, since the intense traffic nearby and repeated commercial and patriotic events taking place in the square might be more disturbing to local inhabitants; worse is that young people are to be prevented from reappropriating public spaces and the past in their own way.

The strategy of rearticulating the public space of Tallinn through a selective erasure of architectural and monumental legacies and the erection of new historic references also became evident with the removal of the Soviet Bronze Soldier (also called Alyosha), originally placed in the city centre (figure 1.12) and since 2007 standing in a military cemetery. Alyosha became a 'symbolic abject' (Mälksoo 2009), gaining a contesting power with regard to the conceived centrality of the city and the corresponding constitution of normative cultural margins, since the presence of Alyosha

Fig. 1.11 Cross of Liberty at Freedom Square (Vabaduse Väljak).
in the centre materialised different understandings of national identity, collective memory and centripetal relations. In turn, the removal of the statue commemorating the ‘Soviet liberation of Estonia’ enforced the new zone of symbolic restoration of the first Estonian Republic, drawn from the Parliament to the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Square.

Henri Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) noted that monumental space constitutes a collective mirror, offering each member of a society an image of that membership, a social visage. Since 1991, the Bronze Soldier has become the gathering point for both celebrations that honoured socialist traditions and Estonian nationalists who protested against honouring the Soviet regime. Aply, Andres Kurg (2009) points out that the monument’s removal from its site undermined Tallinn’s public space (in the widest political sense), since the Bronze Soldier filled the gap in representational politics for the Russian-speaking counterpublic, but also served as an entry point to the city centre for those living in the suburbs (especially elderly people). After being displaced from the city centre, the Soviet Bronze Soldier rests in a military cemetery behind the bus station. The removal could be understood therefore as a disruption of the dialogue between the marginal and hegemonic parts of the society, ostracising minorities even more. Accordingly, the riots that broke out during the
removal of the Soviet monument were not merely about how to interpret the past, and the engagement was not as simple as ‘Estonians fighting against the Russian minority’ (Norman 2009), but they were a Bakhtinian carnival in which hierarchical distinctions and norms were suspended (Mälksoo 2009) or, even more, a radical attempt to subvert the new relationship between the centre and margins of Tallinn and Estonian society at large.

Monuments can also be understood as visible reparations in the public space, answering to some damage, occultation, loss . . . conjuring a void and establishing a new correlation of presences and absences. A monument is simultaneously a material and symbolic operation, retrodictive inasmuch as the past re-presents itself differently to shed a new light on history (Attia 2014). Demolitions and removals have turned Tallinn into a city of unintentional memorialisations beyond the major monumental sites. The demolition of monuments entails a strong symbolic capacity, the act being monumental in itself. Mikhail Yampolsky (1995) and Adrian Forty (1999) have shown how the destruction of monuments in the context of post-Soviet iconoclasm and exorcism created voids in the urban environment, as certain sites gained significance because of the sense of absence generated.

In this context, the destruction of the Bronze Soldier affirmed the power of the victor to the same extent as the erection of a new monument. Raising new monuments and tearing down the socialist ones was thus part of a process of giving new values and resignifying the space (Verdery 1999). As Yampolsky pointed out (1995), monuments have a unique impact on temporal regimes, almost magical; they create a ‘chronometer of history’, a sort of sacral zone that affects the course of time. The aim of reconfiguring temporal regimes was thus accomplished by constructing a metanarrative for and through the space, generating an alignment between ideas pertaining to urban planning and those pertaining to politics.

Interestingly, the physical erasure of the Bronze Soldier does not mean that its existence is forgotten (Kattago 2009b). The absent presence of Alyosha still lingers in Tallinn as a ‘countermonument’ (Michalski 1998) and as organic evidence of absence (Buchli and Lucas 2001b), registering disagreement and encapsulating a process of reflection in motion.11 The discussion around the monument serves as a reminder that Estonia is faced with the difficult question of what to do with its Soviet heritage, an uncomfortable issue often mingled with ideological confrontations, power relations and marginalisation, which is transferred onto space and has an echo in representational politics. ‘It is easier to erect a monument
and freeze an image of the past, than to acknowledge the complexity of historical events’, notes Kattago (2012, 124), emphasising that monuments, museums and commemorations do not monopolise the interpretation of historical traces, and reminding us that tensions cannot simply be solved by the placement or removal of monuments.

And yet, monuments represent the past in the present, and their removal provides the means of rewriting historical narratives. In Estonia, for instance, we can see this in the statues of Lenin, turned into a symbol of toxicity that had to be made invisible, moved out of place. Between 1952 and 1990 there was a statue of Lenin at the intersection of Riia and Võru streets in Tartu, beside a building which is currently occupied by the NATO Baltic Defence College. As urbanist Raina Lillepöld investigated, this was the first statue of Lenin made by Estonian sculptors and architects. In 1972, the monument was listed as a national heritage site. After its dismantling (23 August 1990), the statue was taken to Tartu’s central square, where a placard was hung on it, stating ‘Socialism equals Fascism’. In the 1990s, the local government tried to abolish the heritage status and sell the sculpture at an auction; however, the plan failed. Meanwhile, the statue was moved swiftly to various warehouses, its last location being the site of a waste company (108 Tähe Street). In 2005, Lenin was transported to the backyard of the Museum of History, where he has been lying on the ground alongside 14 statues and sculptures of other comrades. On the website of the museum, they were defined as ‘homeless monuments’, ‘ideological’ and ‘a forgotten heritage’ (figure 1.13). In February 2018, the situation changed, however, since the 15 monuments were reerected and displayed in the backyard of the museum, nowadays transformed into a garden. Also, the official description of the monuments has changed, and one can read on the website of the museum that these sculptures deserve to be preserved ‘from a historical point of view’ because of their ‘high artistic quality’ . . . and in spite of recalling painful events.

With its veneration-depreciation trajectory, the statue of Lenin confirms Mayakovsky’s words, which assert that the Soviet leader is more alive than the living, at least in his absent-presence, acquiring an Other value. Now resting in the backyard of the History Museum, the statue shows the transient value of Soviet things, which may regain their value after passing through a period of being regarded as waste. Yet does it also point at a latent change in the public memory discourse? And shall fallen monuments be exhibited, recycled, inventoried or just buried? In the central square, in a junkyard (figure 1.14), or in the backdoor of the history museum, the statue of Lenin remains as an obdurate reminder of the Soviet time and its pretended ahistorical condition. Through the
Fig. 1.13  A statue of Lenin in the backyard of the Museum of History. Source: Alex Bieth, 2014.

Fig. 1.14  Jäätmekeskus (Junkyard in Tartu). Source: Jerry Waters, 2005.
demolition or neglect of statues of Lenin, the past started to be not only revenged but also distorted, becoming partly dematerialised and concealed. Decades after the break-up of the Soviet Union, some of the remains are still here but the narratives have disappeared, demonstrating that things have a longer duration than people and political regimes. It is in this sense that materiality allows us to access (and preserve) cultural meanings and vanishing worlds.

Residual histories

One of the aims of this book is to offer an insight into the significance of waste for the creation of temporal regimes and representations of social identity. To be categorised as waste implies that something no longer has a use or purpose, lacks cultural distinction and has zero worth (Bauman 2004). Those things considered as ‘superfluous’ or ‘dispensable’ appear in contemporary society as a matter out of place, excluded from the normative, rejected from the system and thus potentially dangerous. In the case of Estonia, ‘wasted humans’ are not the traditional migrants or asylum seekers (as in former empires, such as Britain and France), but those who entered into such conditions by the collapse of the previous order. The constitution of waste also refers to broken knowledge and obsolescence, to what no longer fits, to a mark between the old (what has ended) and the new (what has begun). And yet, the act of separation is neither that neutral, nor free of after-effects, since the destruction or neglect of the recent past erodes an individual’s sense of belonging.

Socialism was over but the people are still here, reveals Svetlana Aleksievich (2015) in her oral history of the post-Soviet world. Many of those who grew up in the USSR are living on ‘second-hand time’, an era of disenchantment, in which they did not find the freedom that was expected, but rather a borrowed time and others’ life. These are people out of history, a remnant of the twentieth century and a question mark against temporal linearity, cast aside without anything durable to counter surrounding societal changes. And yet we coexist with them; those who do not take part in success discourses intrude into our scheme of things from time to time, ‘polluting’ linear narratives and our sense of order. This is precisely complexity brought by waste and the obsolete – it does not vanish, it lingers on, shaping contemporary notions of the subject, of time, and of the world (Tischleder and Wasserman 2015).

In the summer season, more than a hundred youngsters gather in the esplanade Roheline Turg, in the heart of the old town. Every evening
they play ping-pong, sing, flirt and drink alcohol. This space of fun is also a working place for a few people. Besides the waitresses of Hell Hunt, we may meet Urmas (figure 1.15), who earns around €20 a day picking up cans and bottles. On Fridays and Saturdays, he might get over €50. Early in the morning, he goes to the recycling machine situated in a parking lot nearby Rimi supermarket to deliver the cans and bottles in order to receive his salary (26 cans amounts to €2). During several nights in July 2012, I brought him beers. We then sat on a bench and he told me stories, repeating himself a bit. ‘I’m the king of this place. People know me and respect me. At the end, this is not a job; it helps me to forget my pains and sadness’, he confessed. At the time, there were more than 300 can collectors in Tallinn, most of them working at night and only during the summer. Urmas acquired the best area because his son is a popular Estonian rapper: Lennart Lundve, though everyone knows him as ‘Abraham’. The youngsters look for Urmas, bringing the bottles to him: ‘They respect me because of my son’.16

In the autumn of 2011, Urmas ended up in prison after getting into a fight for the territory with another can collector. Urmas spent four months and four days behind bars. Last time we met, in August 2012, he told me that he had already saved more than €2,000 to leave the country.

Fig. 1.15 Urmas. Source: Author, 2012.
He did not want to ask for money from his son, even if he supposes that Abraham is earning well. ‘People should know how difficult life is’, says Urmas, who fought for four years in Afghanistan (1982–1987), in the Red Army. In the 1990s, he worked as a mechanic, repairing boats, but he lost his sight and had to choose between the job and a medical operation. ‘I also fought for the independence of this Republic, Estonia was not fair with me’, he claimed. Forgetting is a tough place, often without a shelter. In the present context, Urmas appears as a social leftover who survives by gathering economic and material leftovers, experiencing abandonment by the state, standing as a human ruin. In a way, he lives in a temporal marginality (Frederiksen 2013), since his opinion is cast aside, and his projections towards the future are different from those envisioned by the official discourse.

Lija, owner of the Georgian restaurant Argo in Tallinn, managed to go through different temporal regimes after a hard time (figure 1.16). Originally based in the Kadriorg quarter, Argo had a loyal clientele composed of neighbours, construction workers and people from the suburbs. The lingua franca in Argo was Russian but I heard Lija, the owner and waitress, speaking in Finnish, Estonian and English. Intrigued, I asked her how many languages she spoke. Unexpectedly, Lija told me that she’s trilingual, but not in any of those three languages. Her native languages

Fig. 1.16  Lija in the new Argo. Source: Author, 2015.
are Armenian, Georgian and Russian, languages that she learned in her childhood in the Caucasus. Lija graduated with a degree in law from the University of Tbilisi. She married a German man and moved with him to Estonia. Having divorced in the 1990s, and with her university BA unrecognised, she took over the restaurant from an Armenian entrepreneur.

Transitions can be hard, especially when you’re old and frail. After fifteen years with Argo, Lija was told to move out as the new owner of the land had a plan to build an apartment building. Since 1980, there has been a bar at this site. Just before the Moscow Olympic Games, a canteen called White Bears was opened, serving cheap beer for seamen and construction workers. ‘Sure, there were many things forbidden in the Soviet period, but we enjoyed stability and social differences weren’t that huge. People say that the Soviet system was alienating, but I have the impression that the current system doesn’t need humans; or at least, it doesn’t need people like me’, laments Lija, who has lived the first half of her life in the Soviet Union and the second half in independent Estonia. ‘In the name of freedom and democracy there have also been injustices’, she complains. After a year in a limbo, searching for a new place for Argo, helping out her sister, Lija found a spot next to the Kristiine shopping mall, and is actually doing well (they even plan to open a second Argo in Helsinki).

Another place that has had a hard time adapting to recent changes is Ariran. This Russo-Korean locale was the first exotic restaurant opened in Tallinn (1991) and, at the time, the street of Telliskivi was a location away from the centre. The owners are a couple and they live at the rear of the house. Sergei was born in Korea, and moved to the Soviet Union when he was 17 years old to study marine engineering. Vera is Russian, works as the chef of the bistro and managed to marry Sergei in spite of the opposition of his mother (figure 1.17). They both moved to Estonia in 1970. He worked in the harbour of Tallinn until the collapse of the USSR, and has been the Baltic billiard champion for 20 years in a row, yet neither of them knows the Estonian language well. They have a son living in the United States, and they liked Florida when they visited him some years ago. The style of the restaurant is somewhat eclectic: real Russian objects and manners coexist with some imported Korean products. They have Russian TV channels playing, but when clients other than regulars enter the restaurant they switch to Korean TV. In the 1990s, the clientele was composed of professors, politicians, metal entrepreneurs, mafia bosses, and so on, but nowadays few adventurers dare to give it a try. The offer of exotic restaurants grew exponentially in the town in recent years, but the couple blames the neighbour, Jüri Liim (an Estonian nationalist figure), for the decline, as he undermined the image of the restaurant in the media.
History and personal biographies intersect in dramatic ways in post-socialist societies, showing not simply in institutional transitions but also as a crisis of values and knowledge (Humphrey 2002, 43), as well as dyssynchrony, a soul delay, an experience of the body being in one time and the mind in another, pointing at a collision of temporalities in the individual and social selves. Further on, the system that sprung from the so-called transition has been rendering those unable to adapt increasingly invisible, irrelevant and superfluous, as depreciated individuals. While young people could manage and better adapt to sudden changes and precariousness (responding with competitiveness and developing a crisis mindset), the elderly came to understand themselves as not merely displaced into the informal economy, but rendered redundant, outdated, endlessly unable to realise their goals (Bauman 2004; Shevchenko 2009).

East European societies were disciplined and remade in order to fit ‘capitalist normality’ (Buchowski 2006); those who were ‘inept’ were accused of obstructing progress and undermining the process of becoming ‘normal’. Facing rapid social and economic change, many people found themselves inexperienced and compelled to reassemble their (inter)subjectivities and simultaneously reinvent their moral personhoods in multifaceted ways (Humphrey 2008). We can even speak of a lack of pragmatic or ‘civilisational’ competence, as Piotr Sztompka suggests (1996), pointing at the discrepancy between the speed of institutional reforms and the
slowness of cultural changes, which becomes an obstacle for development. We can also note an ideological construction of time, adding that dominant ideas of time in society raise the question of whether certain groups and individuals believe themselves to be part of these times (Frederiksen 2013).

Indeed, the distinctiveness of postsocialism rests not only on the influential legacies of socialism, but also on the personal skills that were required afterwards, as well as the acceleration and urgency of the process. As Liviu Chelcea shows in his ethnography of bank workers in Romania, postsocialist transformations also meant an acceleration in the experience of time – accompanied by the installation of new routines, disciplines and standards, a sharper separation of work and life (yet with the colonisation of personal time by the corporation), and a diffused long-term future where meaningful plans appear as fantasy or daydreaming. This has led to significant changes in the organisation of economy, culture, space and time, manifested in discourses of flexibility, the demand for ‘self-regulating selves’ and the creation of a new category – the ‘old timers’ (Chelcea 2015, 350). Furthermore, each new employee was supposed to master and perform operations previously assigned to different employees. This is what David Harvey called the ‘accelerated destruction’ of prior skills (1990, 230) in relation to processes of deindustrialization in the West.

In her ethnography of an Estonian oil shale mine, Eeva Kesküla (2016) notes that the introduction of new technology was as significant to the history of the miners as the year 1991. The introduction of computers contributed to making previous jobs obsolete and intensifying time planning, yet which are the postsocialist nuances in this process of making the past order and skills obsolete? Reflecting the capitalist understanding of ‘time wasted’ as profit lost, rather than the logic of the socialist economy, in which time was made of short-circuiting interruptions, Katherine Verdery remarks that changes in the experience of time have been crucial for the economic and political organisation of these societies, since individuals developed certain responses to the irregular socialist time that affected their daily lives (e.g., hoarding), and with the introduction of standardised yet unequal capitalist time people had to create new responses, living through a transformation of the experience of temporality itself.

Also, Svetlana Boym (1994) notes that temporal regimes were a constitutive dimension of the postsocialist life, in the form of an altered perception of time in response to radical changes and snowballing transformations. It was not simply that people started to live in a deep
fleeing present, but also that they assumed as normal a vast production of excess and obsolescence, which led to the incompatibility of the old and new orders, besides rendering the socialist experience inaccessible, both socially and symbolically (Oushakine 2010). Hence, it was not only that the Soviet political system broke up, but also that the collective memory of the period collapsed in the exercise of eliminating and undoing through negation the cultural myths and representations of the regime (Aarelaid-Tart 2016; Ries 1997).

Concluding considerations

The depiction of socialist legacies as ‘waste’ and ‘residual’ has to do with the remaking of historical representations and temporal orders around which the society is organised: on the one hand, by presenting the USSR as a toxic regime leaving behind only waste and ruin, and on the other hand, by treating people who embody the old personal skills as disposable and superfluous. The break-up of state socialism has been thus a decisive factor in generating a new perspective on the Soviet remnants, depicted after 1991 as a strange and useless inheritance, rather than as a legacy. The efficacy of past representations as waste relies on the framing effect that they deliver. These social constructions function as indexing templates, influencing cultural frameworks and possibilities of becoming. They are easily recognisable and generate affect while not suggesting any obvious ideological agenda.

In this chapter, the phenomenon of waste came into focus not merely as a by-product of manufacturing processes, but rather as an integral element in cultural systems and social structuring, which also has influence in representations of the past. The wasting of things is thus a way of making some things important, by making other things unimportant, taken away, disposed of or sacrificed. Collective memories are always intertwined with selection, discarding and replacement, showing that a particular value, significance and cohesion also emerge through practices of discarding. Yet, the old, the obsolete and the neglected may be seen to oscillate between a derelict condition and precious recognition, depending on the sociocultural context.