



Best Practice: The Influence of Local Residents on Urban Transformation. Case of the Society of Supilinn, Tartu, Estonia

Mart HIOB, Lecturer
Tallinn University of Technology, Tartu College, Estonia
mart.hiob@ttu.ee

Nele NUTT, Lecturer
Tallinn University of Technology, Tartu College, Estonia
nele.nutt@ttu.ee

Sulev NURME, Lecturer
Tallinn University of Technology, Tartu College, Estonia
sulev@artes.ee

This paper presents how the residents of a century-old wooden neighborhood Supilinn in Tartu, Estonia have managed to have a word in the urban transformation process of their surroundings.

Supilinn is a neighborhood of mostly wooden houses built from the beginning of 19th century to the WWII. It is located near the centre of Tartu, Estonia's second largest city of about 100 000 in. Historically Supilinn was situated just outside the medieval walls of Tartu town and is geographically well-defined between the river Emajõgi and a 12 m high slope. On the forth side there is boggy grassland not suitable for construction. Supilinn has less than 2000 in.

During Soviet occupation period there were several plans for the reconstruction of Supilinn by complete replacement of existing housing. The plans were not carried out partly due to the fact that there was not enough housing where the residents could be moved, but mostly because of the poor building conditions - the ground consists of up to 7 m thick peat layer. Since the second half of 1990s there has been a renewed building pressure as a result of economic rise.

Supilinn is attractive as a green residential area close to the city centre. Real estate developers prefer to construct as large houses as possible but the residents do not wish to change the current character of the neighborhood. Estonian planning act gives the local government the right to determine the development of built-up areas within its boundaries. In decision making local residents opinions should be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, the planning practice has favored real estate developers as the owners of the plots.

In 2002, the Society of Supilinn (in Estonian "Supilinna Selts") was established to take care of the interests of the residents. In the beginning the local government did not take the new organization as a negotiation partner. Instead, it was largely ignored as an annoying troublemaker that disturbed a smooth planning process. The Society of Supilinn started to carry out different activities to consolidate the local people. The central event - the days of Supilinn festival - took place for the first time even before the establishment of the Society of Supilinn. Now, the Society made the festival with concerts, presentations, flea market, excursions etc an annual happening that attracted in addition to locals also people from the whole city. The memories of older residents of Supilinn were gathered and published as a book. Members of the Society who had a professional background in history researched the development of Supilinn in archives. There has been established a database, which is waiting for public presentation. Since many houses are preserved from the 19th century in their original state, the historical project design documents are surprisingly accurate and real.

From January 2003 the planning act gave the opportunity to protect historical neighborhoods as "valuable built-up milieu areas". The Society has applied for a valuable milieu area status for Supilinn as a whole. From the end of 2005 most of Supilinn has been declared as valuable milieu but the accurate measures for protection have not been clarified. There are only some general guidelines which are sometimes questioned by developers. Since the rules for building are not clear, there has been a fight over every house and new building. The Society would like to preserve all old houses disregarding their current state. From the economic point of view there would be more profitable to demolish the old houses and build new ones that are larger both in size of building area and in height. According to the Society of Supilinn

this would disturb and eventually ruin the historical surroundings. The result would damage both the living quality of local residents and the common cultural heritage.

In 2007, Tartu City Counsel started a new planning process for determining the building conditions in Supilinn after receiving an application from the Society of Supilinn. Due to the lack of money no real action has been carried out. The financial crisis has slowed down the pace of real estate development as well, which makes it a perfect moment for planning and opposing building restrictions.

The Society of Supilinn is a good example of gradual development of a local residents' group. In the start there were only a few interested persons who wanted to preserve their valuable surroundings. During its 8 years existence the Society of Supilinn has grown to a neighborhood's representative organization, which the city government deals as an equal partner.

KEY WORDS: Local residents, neighborhood society, Supilinn, Tartu.