

## FROM NEO-FUNCTIONALIST TO LEMURIAN ARCHITECT-PRIEST INDREK GRIGOR

### MYTH OF THE CREATOR

Vilen Künnapu has perpetuated himself in Estonian art history as a neo-functionalist architect in the 1970s, a post-modernist architect in the 1980s, the most successful architect of the 1990s and the most eccentric today. Looking for a factor that connects his entire creative practice – which includes writing fiction, assemblage, drawing, and in recent years, also painting as well as architecture, it seems appropriate to say that the common denominator is his faith in the myth of the creator as an artist-genius. This emerges with particular clarity from Künnapu's essays, where he seems to be seeking a justification for his activity by writing about architecture, projecting himself not so much on history as on historical figures. This projection gives rise to a stylistic technique characteristic of Künnapu,<sup>1</sup> one where argumentation is intertwined with the biographical, often quasi-mythical or outright anecdotal, details of notable individuals from cultural history. I will give as an example here a section from his article "Swimming against the current", which illustrates rather well the logic of rhythm or rhyme, but not necessarily that of content, and which interconnects different names. The question addressed by his thinking remains hidden here. This kind of vacuum is also relatively characteristic of Künnapu's poetics, especially when personal names come into play.

**"Tatlin allegedly offered his services to Picasso as his valet, but was rejected. Vladimir then apparently returned to Moscow and, bitterly disappointed, designed the monument for the Third International. Giorgio de Chirico's Greek origins, his younger years spent in Munich and the smooth atmosphere of Ferrera form a singular triangle, on which rests the entire phenomenon of *pittura metafisica*. All the founders of Modernism in fact swam against the current. Our Burman, too, produced a house with at least 150 different windows. Upon the arrival of functionalism, the eclectic-architect Vladovsky said resentfully: "Eti ne hudozhniki, eti zapozhniki" (they are not artists but shoemakers), and devoted himself to writing books instead. Lembit Sarapuu has a novel by Vladovsky, 'Novy Vavilon' (New Babylon)..."**<sup>2</sup>

1

In her dissertation that discusses Estonian essays in architectural history written between the 1960s and 1980s, Epp Lankots describes subjective historicism as a generational view:

"The contextualisation of history from the point of view of one's personal agenda was one of the strategies used in the work of the experimental architects and artists who were active in Tallinn in the 1970s." (Epp Lankots, "Moodsa arhitektuuri kriitiline historiograafia. Modernsuse käsitlused Leo Gensi ja Leonhard Lapini arhitektuuriajaloolistes tekstides 1960.–1980. aastail" (Critical Historiography of Modern Architecture: Narrating Modernity in the Architectural Histories of Leo Gens and Leonhard Lapin in the 1960s–1980s). Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2014, p. 26).

2

Vilen Künnapu, "Swimming Against the Current" *Place. Image. Energy: Selected texts 2001–2010*. Tallinn: Vilen Künnapu, 2010, p. 14.

In Künnapu's world view, things simply exist and/or do not exist through people and everything must ultimately reduce to a single author. So, in an episode of the radio programme "Night university", he refers to a piece of oriental wisdom, contending that: "We can only change ourselves, not the world."<sup>3</sup>

**3**  
Vilen Künnapu, „Fulleri kuppel ja lõpmatuse variatsioonid“ (Fuller's dome and variations of infinity). ERR radio programme "Õöülikool" (Night university). 9 May 2015.

## ARCHITECTURE AND MORALITY

The beginning of the new millennium marks a moment of transition in Künnapu's work: a rather radical change occurs, one that is observable with particular clarity in his articles and, for purely practical but I would also say conceptual reasons, emerges as a somewhat smaller leap in his architecture. According to Künnapu himself, a break occurred in 1999, at an "Indian camp" on the island of Naissaar while partaking in a religious cleansing rite conducted by native North Americans.<sup>4</sup> As a result of a spiritual shock, Künnapu gave up alcohol, and in his articles, the previous self-image of a modernist genius that bestowed value on art historical awareness was replaced with the image of a New Age prophet. Let me point out, furthermore, that although Künnapu condemns his earlier habits, he does not renounce his previous work. Unexpectedly, he does not see any conflict between his creative self before and after the spiritual awakening, rather the opposite, in retrospect a certain wisdom, hitherto hidden from the author himself, emerges from his earlier work: "In the early 1970s, I had the opportunity to visit the house of Konstantin Melnikov himself in Moscow. This was an exceptionally powerful experience... Thinking back, something fatal happened there: it was as if I had made a pact with positive forces higher than myself."<sup>5</sup>

**4**  
Künnapu describes his spiritual awakening in numerous interviews and refers to it as a significant event in several articles. It is not easy to provide a specific reference, but the most direct description is offered in the episode "Fulleri kuppel ja lõpmatuse variatsioonid" of the radio programme "Õöülikool" (ERR, 9 May 2015).

**5**  
Vilen Künnapu, "Circle" *Place. Image. Energy*, p. 191.

Evaluative claims made by the author are not the only evidence of this continuity – so is the unchanged structure of the lines of reasoning in his essays. In the preface to his 2001 collection of articles *Across the Red River*, Künnapu writes,

**“Oscar Niemeyer has said something like this: a line gives form to a house, a good story about a project adds credibility, and the architect’s knowledge and all he has read take his architecture to an intellectual level. Architecture for me is an intellectual activity expressed by drawings. A written text is like a design for the house. It is made whole from different parts.”**<sup>6</sup>

In the preface to the 2010 collection *Place. Image. Energy*, which brings together texts from a pivotal decade for the architect, we find a self-description that, at first glance, is irreversibly different:

**“I am increasingly fascinated with drawing and watercolours. I have found that a quickly completed sketch seems to take me into the common field, where I obtain information about the character of the portrayed (person or building). An encounter with the higher reality is surprisingly enjoyable. August<sup>7</sup> and I recently returned from India, where we met the painter Francis D’Souza. Every day, the artist made at least ten small drawings. This was his form of meditation. We, too, were inspired to join the ‘faith of drawing’.”**<sup>8</sup>

Although different in content, these extracts are strangely similar. The classic Modernist architect Niemeyer has been replaced with the spiritualist Indian painter D’Souza, but purely in terms of the technique of story telling, both names fulfil the same role. And while what was previously valued was erudition and knowledge, which take “architecture to an intellectual level” through drawing, which Künnapu himself describes as an intellectual activity, after his “spiritual awakening”, drawing identified with meditation takes one directly to “the common field”. The function of drawing, that of being a sketch for what is realised in architecture however, remains unchanged. I would say that a similar dynamic is also present in Künnapu’s architectural work. Constructivist metal structures are replaced with towers inspired by the stupa; the white-washed geometric shapes of a functionalist aesthetic are replaced by colourful details that make no attempt to hide their purely aesthetic nature behind a constructivist or functionalist programme. The architect’s values changed over time but not his working methods.

**6**

Vilen Künnapu, “Instead of a Preface” in *Across the Red River. Selected texts 1972–2001*. Tallinn: Tallinna Tehnikakõrgkool, 2001, p. 9.

**7**

August Künnapu – painter, son of Vilen Künnapu.

**8**

Vilen Künnapu, “Foreword” in *Place. Image. Energy*, p. 10.

## FROM NEO-FUNCTIONALIST TO LEMURIAN ARCHITECT-PRIEST

As a member of the most important non-formal group of architects in the history of Estonian architecture, the Tallinn School, and in the 1980s, consistently a co-author of the architectural magazine *Ehituskunst (Art of Building)*, which was established partly at the initiative of the above group, Künnapu holds an important place in Estonia's architectural history because of both his architectural and essay work. What is more, neo-functionalism is a topic that is even impossible to discuss without bringing up Künnapu. An important point of dispute that has arisen among historians is the question of whether the neo-functionalism that emerged in the 1970s is a phenomenon in the semiotics of architecture, and in that sense an aesthetic phenomenon, one that continues without interruption or much change in meaning until the 1990s<sup>9</sup> and in a sense still exists today – a view put forward by architectural historian Krista Kodres in 1993, during the first stage of the rewriting of Estonian art history using a nationalist model. Or whether a late-modernist socio-political programme characteristic of the era is also to be found in that neo-functionalism – a view with which Andres Kurg challenges Kodres

in a 2008 catalogue for an introductory exhibition of the Tallinn School architects.<sup>10</sup> The details of this dispute are unimportant here, but looking at Künnapu's creative method as a largely intuitive, universal formula, I favour the view that it was primarily aesthetic self-expression. The main reason why I remain critical of the socio-political reading is that, as I find it useful to treat Künnapu's texts as sketches for architectural designs, it seems to me that both Kurg and Kodres are biased in choosing the texts that support their views. They only pay attention to the topics and concepts that are relevant from the point of view of a modernist theory of art, while spiritualism and metaphysics, which are central in Künnapu's texts after 2000 but were already there in the 1980s, go unnoticed. I consider this kind of approach misleading, as it ignores the vocabulary of prestige and the formal character of the scholarly rhetoric in Künnapu's articles. Theory, be it modernist or New Age, has a formal, habitual or, as I will be arguing below, automatistic role of conveying an abstract structure, rather than necessarily having any substantial meaning in his texts.

9

Krista Kodres, "White Houses are Something Else. Neofunctionalism in Estonian Architecture" in the exhibition catalogue *Otherwise. Functionalism and Neofunctionalism in Estonian Architecture*. Tallinn: Museum of Estonian Architecture, 1993, pp. 44–57.

10

Andres Kurg "Modernism's Endgame, Tallinn 1978" in the exhibition catalogue *Environment, Projects, Concepts. Architects of the Tallinn School 1972–1985*. Tallinn: Museum of Estonian Architecture, 2008, pp. 56–71.

At the same time, there are some very direct connections indeed between Künnapu's articles and architectural designs. An article that appeared simultaneously with the completion of the design for the Tervis sanatorium (designed 1975, completed 1977), "Tänav" (Street),<sup>11</sup> is indeed emblematic in terms of the programmatic description that it offers, as Andres Kurg points out,<sup>12</sup> and, because of its command of the modernist theory of architecture, it is ideally suited for drawing generalisations that characterise the whole period: "Bridges, escalators, glass galleries can make the street multi-functional, more compact."<sup>13</sup> A structurally very similar sentence written thirty-three years later, on the other hand, would be "problematic" as a quotation of architectural theory in the context of a scholarly article and must be treated as a sign of the author's eccentricity: "We have discovered that if we activate some significant points in a town with mandala-shaped energy towers, the whole energetic health of the town could considerably improve."<sup>14</sup> In light of the distance in time between the texts, accounts of architectural history could be justified in ignoring the eccentricity intertwined with the esotericism characteristic of Künnapu's later texts if it were not the case that a response that Künnapu gives to the question of the architect's status published in the 1983 volume of *Ehituskunst*, in a section on an exhibition by ten architects, already betrays the importance of esoterica in the 1980s: "The work of an architect is similar to that of a shaman. Of primary importance here is generating an appropriate state of mind: spiritual change, movement, self-analysis – these are the goals of an architect."<sup>15</sup>

I do not wish to claim that Estonian architectural history should be re-interpreted from a metaphysical point of view, quite the opposite, but a much more critical look should be taken at the use of language that imitates the modernist theory of art. I would even say that today's art historians attribute to the use of concepts in articles written in the 1970s and to the authors' conceptual goals at the time, aspirations that these might not bear out. In the context of Künnapu's writings, the question seems to be not only whether these exhibited a sincere acceptance of social utopianism, or a cult of machine aesthetics, but also to what extent there was, either directly or indirectly, conscious self-colonisation – both in architectonic forms and theory.

**11**

Vilen Künnapu, "Tänav" (Street)  
in *Across the Red River*, pp. 61–65.

**12**

Andres Kurg, "Modernisms Endgame",  
Tallinn 1978, p. 61.

**13**

Vilen Künnapu, "Tänav" (Street)  
in *Across the Red River*, p. 62.

**14**

Vilen Künnapu, "Circle"  
in *Place. Image. Energy*, p. 190.

**15**

Vilen Künnapu, *Ehituskunst*, Volumes 2 and 3,  
1982, 1983, p. 49.

## HOME TOWN TALLINN

Alongside the changes in terminology, theoretical views and values in Künnapu's texts, it is interesting to observe the persistence of images and forms through time and their transition from one medium to another. When collecting source material for the exhibition and this article, for me the most surprising find concerning the continuity of imagery were the illustrations used with the article "Poeetilise ruumi mõistatus" (The Enigma of the Poetic Space)<sup>16</sup> published in the 1984 volume of *Ehituskunst*. To begin with, three views of Tallinn: the first with a rooftop of an apartment building with antennas, and church towers in the background; the second, a view of the Old Town with the tower of St. Nicholas' Church under reconstruction at the end of Lai Street; the third showing the Tallinn power plant with its chimney on the left side of the photograph, the tower of St. Olaf's Church in the centre and a few smaller chimneys and the metal structure of a watch tower on the right. At the centre of the page, a reproduction of a painting by Andres Tolts, "Veetorn" (Water tower, 1984), holds pride of place. The cherry in the cake of the composition is a reclining nude – a photograph from Edward Kienholz's installation "The tadpole piano pool with woman affixed also" (1972). Contact with art history is established using a reproduction of the painting "Visit to the Mysterious Baths" (1930) by Giorgio de Chirico, which opens the article.

An art historical dimension, geometric or simply compositional symmetry, towers, city views and nudes that lend themselves to all kinds of Freudian simplifications, is carried through all of Künnapu's work. A conversation with the artist, however, revealed no systematic explanation behind the repetition of images. The closest thing to an explanation of this consistency seems to be the automatistic creative method. Künnapu claims that he does not calculate, neither in writing, painting nor designing buildings, and even if this favours uniformity and repetition, it is probably one of the most important factors that keeps Künnapu's passionate creative nature together.

Speaking of Künnapu's chronotope, or the artist's unique spacetime model that describes his relationship to the memory of place and to the changing of time, it strikes one that, although he has spent his whole life quite literally building Tallinn, he does not seem to perceive his home town as a unique piece of cultural heritage and rather sees the whole world, both historically and spatially, as an integrated architectural landscape. For Künnapu, there is no conflict in a plan to build a raft with nine stupas on the Thames outside Tate Modern ("9 Mandala Temples on the River Thames, London", 2004) or in the 2010 project "The River Bell" for the London Festival of Architecture, where a church bell-shaped stupa was placed outside Southwark Cathedral in London. Künnapu comments on the latter in his interview for the daily newspaper *Postimees*, where he contends that he does take into account the specifics of the location, but makes no attempt to hide the fact that the idea that underlies the image is that of the stupa:

16

Vilen Künnapu, „Poeetilise ruumi mõistatus” (The Enigma of the Poetic Space). *Ehituskunst*, Volume 4, 1984, pp. 52–55.

**“The first sketches came quickly, but I felt that it was overly reminiscent of the stupa, which is part of Eastern culture, while I wanted to connect it more closely to Christian culture and Gothic architecture. Only then the image of the bell and the wheel derived from the rose window on top of it like a halo came along.”<sup>17</sup>**

The chapel designed for the prison yard of Tallinn Prison (design 2004) or the temple-house in Suurupi (2007) are completely at odds with any ordinary understanding of taking account of the environment or local tradition.

The role of the work of the artist as a place independent of the rest of the world emerges more clearly from Künnapu's paintings. The first five paintings, completed in 2012, which came into being as a result of indirect encouragement by the architect's son, the painter August Künnapu, show the architectonic landscape of the island of Santorini in the Aegean Sea. The bright colours familiar from the palette of August Künnapu and the composition, which ties in seamlessly with the Mediterranean architectural tradition and is based on geometric shapes, also rather quickly transferred to his views of Tallinn. Künnapu depicts Tallinn the same way as he does Santorini, thereby presenting the two places as identical. The only thing that distinguishes the one from the other is that the views of Tallinn focus on towers, while the Santorini in the paintings is a geometric sea of houses rising up in steps. Alongside the church towers of Tallinn, Künnapu himself, with Ain Padrik, has added the Radisson SAS hotel (2001), which significantly affects the skyline of the city and in the painting “Kiek in de Kök tower”(2014) proudly stands side-by-side with the the city's other significant landmarks. The upright format of the canvases with views of Tallinn, too tall to be accidental, also catches the eye.

The unexpected uniformity of Tallinn and Santorini remains within the confines of a single medium, but analogues of this kind of direct transition can also be found in how one medium affects another. This way, in my opinion, the Elephant House (Villa Kristi, 2013) built in Maardu constitutes one of the most unexpected transitions of imagery in all of Künnapu's work. It is as if the building had stepped right out of a Künnapu painting – from the geometrical forms down to the blue elephant sculpture that seeks to emulate the texture of brush strokes. I believe that the same kind of influence in the form of the direct, one-to-one transition that Künnapu's painting currently exerts on his architectural work was also present when Venturi's architectural theory influenced it in the late 1970s during the designing of the flower shop (designed in 1978, completed in 1983). Against the background of this assumption, Künnapu's relationship to theory emerges as much more formal and much less ideological than one might expect. Both buildings are based on geometry, but the theory that once justified his formal choices has by now lost its meaning for the architect and been replaced by an openly intuitive compositional solution. Therefore, speaking about metaphysical space in 1984, Künnapu uses Mati Unt's description of the flower shop, the poetic use of language of which still clearly betrays the kind of talking in circles that imitates the canon of post-modernist rhetoric:

17

“Ideed on isikutest tähtsamad” (Ideas are more important than individuals), interview with Vilen Künnapu by Madli Maruste. Postimees, 7 July 2010.

**“The flower shop’s mask is modest, even conservative, but it does not copy any style or era. It is sly, an impersonation of a ‘city centre house’. It uses elements and details from the surrounding buildings. It is like a werewolf.”<sup>18</sup>**

In a comment on the genesis of the Elephant House for the *ArchDaily* online magazine, Künnapu says,

**“The solution of the Elephant House largely rests on the initiative of the young clients with their extravagant wishes, my growing keenness on heavy, stronghold-like architecture and a need to produce colourful solutions. I remember that the clients sent me a picture of a weird house from a computer game, with mammoths, Gothic windows and technological screens... We can say that the entire Elephant House is in a sense a time machine, which leads us into a parallel magic world. Or it could be a ship where the passengers take a long journey across the ocean called Life.”<sup>19</sup>**

**18**

Vilen Künnapu, “Reflections of Metaphysical Space” in *Across the Red River*, p. 86.

**19**

<http://www.archdaily.com/399433/the-elephant-house-villa-kristi-vilen-kunnapu>

**20**

Vilen Künnapu, “Instead of a Preface” in *Across the Red River*, p. 8.

**21**

In addition to those mentioned in other contexts in this article, the examples also include the following: a monument to police officers killed in Mão (1995), a monument to tsunami victims in Oslo (designed in 2006), a temple in Lilleoru (2005), etc.

**22**

Vilen Künnapu’s solo exhibition “Sun Tower” in the small exhibition hall of Tartu Art House, 19.11.–15.12. 2013.

## **THE ARCHITECT STEINER**

From the above account of Künnapu as a theorist, visual artist and writer, it is relatively clear that the ultimate goal of the creator is architecture. I do not see this goal as involving a cult of the modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk*; instead, it is a personal, and possibly unconscious, choice. In the 1980s, when Künnapu was, for political reasons, deprived of the opportunity to act as an architect, he considered a career in writing, planning a collection of stories about an architect named Steiner,<sup>20</sup> but with the collapse of the Soviet Union, he unhesitatingly abandoned this career plan for architecture. The ambition that underlies this plan, however, suggests that literature is the one field in Künnapu’s creative repertoire that is the most independent of architecture.

His architectonic forms, on the other hand, which strike one as sort of models for chapel designs<sup>21</sup> and soared in number after his discovery of the stupa as an embodiment of geometric symmetry, are so directly related to an architecture that it is difficult to keep track of when they are objects created for an exhibition or the interior design of a building and when they are sketches for an architectural design. Still, even here there are exceptions, such as the architectonic form “Sun tower” (2013), which was a centrepiece at his painting-centred solo show in Tartu Art House<sup>22</sup> and is clearly influenced by the column towers in De Chirico’s paintings, as such being another example of how painting influences architecture.



Alongside sketches for architectural designs, collages have the clearest function in Künnapu's creative repertoire. Künnapu created his first three collages in 1998 while at the Lido during a trip to Italy, using materials he had at hand in his hotel room. His later collages, too, would retain this function of something between a travelogue and a diary. In them, one often finds metro or train tickets, iconic images of places visited, such as the Statue of Liberty in New York or the Egyptian pyramids. At the same time, however, they are a meeting place for on-going architectural projects: consequently, in one collage the design for the Tallinn Prison chapel and the Viru Centre come together. And perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, the artist's passions find their expression in his collages. The very medium of collage already refers back to classic modernism. The allusion is emphasised by the choice of imagery – such as scenes from cinema classics, a Zeppelin or a motor car that has a retro feel about it – and the constructivist aesthetic in the form of acute angles and diagonals used in composition.

## THE SUN ALSO RISES

The most strongly metaphysical element in Künnapu's work – present in both his stories and collages, as well as in roughly half of his paintings – is the yellow circle. In the paintings it is relatively clear that it is a representation of a celestial body, which often first and foremost serves the purpose of balancing the composition, similarly in a few collages where the same image occurs, while in the stories the circle takes on a much more metaphysical meaning. First, it is a narrative culmination: although the rising or setting sun is in itself a simple symbol, within the plot of Künnapu's absurd stories, the end of the story also means the end of the described – its flowing into the absolute, which cannot have a physical output, unlike the nude that haunts his drawings, paintings and collages<sup>23</sup>, and unavoidably comes across as having a counter-image in the form of the towers. "The pilot laughed his wild mystical laughter and raised his mighty machine higher and higher, further and further, towards the rising sun, towards the setting moon."<sup>24</sup>

### 23

"In Tõnis Laanemaa's studio in the Art Hall, I also painted a nude. I realised that a fragile human body and timeless architecture form one organic whole," Künnapu writes in the catalogue for his "Sun tower" show at Tartu Art House. (Vilen Künnapu, "The Art of Painting" in the catalogue *Paintings*. Tallinn: Vilen Künnapu, p. 5).

### 24

Vilen Künnapu, "Steiner, Assistant and Towers" in *Across the Red River*, p. 207.