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**Updates on the Estonian National Opera
extension within the World Heritage property
"Historic Centre (Old Town) of Tallinn"**

Dear Berta de Sancristóbal,

We refer to previous correspondence concerning the planned extension of the Estonian National Opera within the World Heritage property "Historic Centre (Old Town) of Tallinn" and wish to provide an update on recent developments.

The National Opera represents a fundamental element of Estonia's cultural identity, and the preservation and advancement of opera culture are very important to Estonia. The Ministry of Culture therefore convened a working group in June 2025 comprising representatives of the Ministry of Culture, the City of Tallinn, the Estonian Association of Architects, the National Heritage Board, and the Estonian National Opera. The task of the working group was to find a feasible solution for the development of the National Opera building within its complex heritage and urban context, ensuring that its spatial requirements are reconciled with the obligations arising from World Heritage status, applicable legislation, and established quality criteria.

The working group completed its work in May 2026 and decided that comprehensive analysis of the spatial programme and building volume should be carried out focusing on three options for an extension required to meet the functional needs of a contemporary opera and ballet theatre.

- A. An extension with a new auditorium and stage in a new building volume on the Uue Turu side of the National Opera, physically connected to the rear of the historic building.
- B. An extension involving the reconstruction of the existing auditorium and the expansion of the stage in accordance with the special conditions for heritage protection issued by the National Heritage Board in 2024.
- C. An extension with a new auditorium and stage in a separate building volume at Teatri väljak (located in proximity but outside the World Heritage property), with functional integration between the existing and new buildings ensured through underground connections.

The first two options were also examined in a Heritage Impact Assessment commissioned by the National Heritage Board in 2025. The third option is a new proposal. The working group considered it necessary to look at all three options again in a comparable framework, to enable a balanced comparative evaluation of their respective impacts.

The working group recommended undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the spatial programme and building volume in order to evaluate three alternative siting options for the proposed extension.

This analysis is intended to compare the suitability of each location against the functional requirements of a contemporary opera and ballet theatre, assess opportunities to optimise the spatial programme within the parameters of the given scenario and to consider which solution is legally, spatially, and from a heritage protection perspective feasible. The overall objective is to identify the option that most effectively responds to the project's complex and interrelated requirements. It was decided that this analysis would be commissioned and carried out through a public procurement process.

Building on the outcomes of the working group, the Estonian National Opera prepared a public procurement procedure for the development of spatial programmes and corresponding volume analyses for all three options. For that purpose, a procurement committee was established. The procurement committee finalised the procurement documentation that was published in the public procurement register (Riigihangete register 7.0.4) on 30 June 2026. The deadline for receipt of tenders is 22 September 2026 and the Contractor shall complete the work within 90 days.

The Terms of Reference of the procurement include the following heritage-related considerations:

- The Estonia Theatre is located within the Old Town of Tallinn, which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List and designated as a heritage conservation area.
- The Estonia Theatre is a listed architectural and historical monument (Reg. No. 1071). The National Heritage Board has issued special conditions for heritage protection for the extension of the building regarding option B.
- In 2025, the National Heritage Board commissioned a heritage impact assessment for the extension of the Estonia theatre.
- Adjacent to the Estonia Theatre is Tammsaare Park, a protected natural area; as well as the lower town fortifications dating from the 13th–18th centuries: city wall, towers, gate structures, earthworks, and moat (Reg. No. 3015), which are protected as architectural monuments; and the archaeological monument “Tallinn Old Town” (1st–2nd millennium CE, Reg. No. 31172).
- On a neighbouring plot stands another symbolic building, the Tallinn German Theatre building (1908–1910), which is also a protected architectural monument (Reg. No. 3118).
- The urban spatial impact of the extension must be consistent with the fundamental principles of high-quality space, the Davos quality criteria, and UNESCO World Heritage protection principles.

To summarize, the objective of the public procurement is to find a partner who will develop solutions that consider the expectations of the National Opera, the Ministry of Culture, the National Heritage Board, and the City of Tallinn. The selected partner must complete two tasks under this procurement:

- 1) to prepare three spatial programs together with their respective volume analyses;
- 2) to prepare an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages associated with the implementation of each spatial program.

The overall purpose of the procurement is to develop a spatial programme that will form the basis for a future architectural competition for the extension of the Estonian National Opera.

In Estonia, special conditions for heritage protection for the detailed spatial plan must be prepared if a detailed spatial plan is legally required and the site is located on a heritage conservation area (Option A) or its buffer zone (Option C). These conditions ensure that the proposed changes within the planned area do not jeopardise the preservation of the heritage conservation area or the protected monument, nor the objectives established for its buffer zone. Where the construction of a building does not require a detailed spatial plan – for example, when extending an existing building by up to 33% of its original volume (Option B) – and the project proceeds on the basis of design specifications, heritage protection special conditions are prepared for the design process.

The partner selected through the public procurement procedure needs approved special conditions for heritage protection for all three options so that they can be taken into account in the final development of the scenarios.

Currently, the special conditions for heritage protection have been issued for Option B. Special conditions for heritage protection for the detailed spatial plan for Option A were drafted and presented to the Heritage Conservation Commission of Tallinn City Planning Department for approval. The Commission reviewed the submitted documentation and the applicable legal framework on 15 July 2026. Having considered the opinions of the National Heritage Board's Expert Panels on Built Heritage and Archaeological Heritage, who were consulted in the process, the Commission decided not to approve the heritage conservation special conditions submitted for the detailed spatial plan for Option A.

We hope that the ongoing process will lead to a balanced and sustainable solution that duly respects World Heritage protection requirements while addressing well-substantiated functional needs of the Estonian National Opera.

Please note that due to the temporary unavailability of Mr Mihkel Kaevats, the designated national focal point for the 1972 Convention, Ms Marju Reismaa, Acting Head of the Cultural Heritage Department of the Ministry of Culture will serve as *ad interim* focal point for the Convention until further notice.

Yours sincerely,



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