

Enclosure 1:

Detailed overview of the ongoing debate concerning possible annex to Estonia theatre located in Historic Centre (Old Town) of Tallinn, Estonia

Reference: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/822/>

Brief description of the building

The theatre and concert hall Estonia was completed in 1913 according to the architectural design of Finnish architects (W. Lönn and A. Lindgren) in a mixture of Art Nouveau and Neoclassical styles. It stands next to the current Estonian Drama Theatre (arch V. Bubõr), which was completed only a few years earlier (1910). The construction was supported by the public sale of shares among the Estonians from all over Estonia and Estonian diaspora in St. Petersburg. The structure of the building was defined by two parallel halls with high mansard roofs and the lower part of the building between them. Estonia was the largest public building in Tallinn at the time. The building, intended as a community centre for the Estonians in Tallinn, became one of the most important symbolic objects of the Estonian cultural and political scene from the moment of its inauguration, for example the Estonian Constituent Assembly met in Estonia in 1919 and majority of other nationally important events took place here throughout the 20th century. The building has hosted the National Opera in one wing since the beginning, the other wing has served as a concert hall. Estonia was severely damaged during the Second World War in a Soviet air raid in March 1944. As a result, the roof, interior and one side of the building were destroyed. Its reconstruction and expansion became one of the most important reconstruction projects in the post-war years. The restoration design was drawn up in 1945 (arch A. Kotli) based on the entry work of the architectural competition. Originally in the Art Nouveau and Neoclassical styles, the destroyed parts of the building including its interiors were restored in post-war Neoclassical style. Where the war damage was lesser, the original architectural form was mostly preserved. Estonia became a symbol of post-war reconstruction and reconciliation.

Therefore, Estonia Theatre represents important social processes and historical events in the history of Estonia and has both outstanding architectural and cultural historical value. The building is in the south-eastern side of the Tallinn's Old Town heritage conservation area and archaeological zone. It has been a national monument (listed building) since 1975 and was last renovated in 1997.

Protected values

External appearance and visibility

Estonia Theatre is one of the most important buildings in the city centre and dominates the surrounding urban space, both in terms of its location and scale – it is one of the largest buildings in the Tallinn's Old Town heritage conservation area, the influence of which is emphasised by the surrounding Tammsaare Park. Planning an annex to the Estonia Theatre in the size and location shown in the visualisation (see below) will significantly change the exterior appearance of the building, as it is necessary to demolish a significant part of the northwest facade, restored in the 1950s. In addition, the annex closes the characteristic, historically established views of the building. A dominant annex would change the exterior of the building as seen from different directions. Furthermore, the annex would have a significant spatial impact on the wider surrounding environment, including the nearby Estonian Drama Theatre, another important building from the point of view of cultural history of Estonia, closing the views and significantly changing the historically developed spatial context of the building.

Archaeological aspects

The oldest settlement traces in the Estonia Theatre area are related to the medieval and early modern suburbs, which today are protected as an area with an archaeological protection zone. A road from the early days of the city or even prehistoric times has run next to the property, bordered by the suburban plots of citizens. The first fortifications were built in front of the medieval city wall between 1530 and 1550. The outer bank of the moat with a retaining wall extended to the area. In the 1750–1770 a large-scale construction of city fortifications was undertaken, and a semi-bastion was built here. It has been preserved as an important underground structure. According to the bylaws of Tallinn's Old Town Heritage Conservation Area, new construction in the fortifications must be avoided, except for the reconstruction of the now perished buildings which existed before 1944. The purpose of the archaeological protection zone is to preserve the structures that have been preserved underground and the visual and urban character of the integral earthen fortification belt around the medieval walled city. The planned annex in the north-western part of the Estonia Theatre will affect the archaeological zone. The construction of an annex most likely means the elimination of the preserved buildings and the archaeological layer.

An appropriate architectural form of a possible new construction fitting into the surrounding urban space, as well as the preservation of archaeological layers and structures, are crucial for sustaining the historic centre of old town.

Nature conservation aspects

The location of the current Estonia Theatre – Tammsaare Park – is in the medieval fortification zone, which was converted into a designed public park area in the middle of the 19th century. Since 2004, Tammsaare Park has been a nature reserve park and therefore building an annex into the park area would go against the restrictions in force.

The need for an annex of the Estonia Theatre

The Estonian National Opera operating in Estonia Theatre has proposed building an annex. The proposal is motivated by the fact that the historical building no longer meets the requirements of a contemporary opera and ballet theatre. To ensure the continued use of the existing building an annex must be built. A visualisation in the appendix illustrates the size and location of the proposed annex. This solution addresses the optimal spatial requirements of the Estonian National Opera. As illustrated on the drawings, the planned annex is as large as the existing building or even larger and is partly higher than the historical building. The construction of the annex may require the demolition of one of the facades, the preserved underground-built structures, and archaeological layers.

The decision of the Estonian Parliament

In 2020 the Estonian National Opera applied for state funding to build an annex. The application was selected by the Culture Committee of the Estonian Parliament together with four other buildings as objects of national importance and deserving state funding. The Culture Committee of the Estonian Parliament discussed the funding of the cultural objects of significant importance without prior public discussion or expert consultation. On September 13, 2021, The Estonian Parliament, the highest decision-making body in the Republic of Estonia, took the final decision to finance the annex of Estonia Theatre in the future.

The views of local and national heritage protection authorities and experts on the annex of the Estonia Theatre

The discussion regarding the need for an annex to Estonia Theatre has lasted for years. For example, on April 23, 2003, the Expert Council of Architectural Monuments discussed the issue and gave an opinion: *“It is not possible to build an annex for Estonia Theatre.”*

ICOMOS Estonia National Committee made a public appeal to the Estonian Parliament before the final selection of culturally significant objects to receive state funding, on April 22, 2021, to point out that the planned annex is not in compliance with the principles of heritage protection in Tallinn Old Town heritage conservation area and has a significant negative effect on the Estonia Theatre, one of the most outstanding cultural monuments in Estonia.¹

The public appeal of ICOMOS rose significant attention and initiated an intensive public debate in the media and social media. The opinions have been diverse; however, the annex has mostly been supported by the people connected to the opera and theatre while there is a massive opposition to the annex by the public. Many experts have called upon the need to find an alternative plot for the opera house.²³

On April 21, 2021, the issue of building an annex to the Estonia Theatre was discussed in the heritage protection commission of the Tallinn City Planning Board. The commission found that *“The construction of an annex to Estonia Theatre at the location and volume provided is not possible, because the desired volumes are too large and compressed for the treated area.”* The commission requested the National Heritage Board’s opinion on the proposal.

The National Heritage Board discussed the issue of the annex of the Estonia Theatre for the first time in the meeting of the procedural committee held on April 24, 2021, and decided to forward the proposal of the annex of the Estonia Theatre to expert councils of architectural monuments, archaeological heritage, and landscape architecture for an opinion.

Before the meeting of the expert councils, the National Heritage Board organised a discussion on May 7, 2021 to hear the opinions of external experts in the field of heritage protection, the ICOMOS Estonian Committee, the Estonian Heritage Society, the Union of Estonian Architects, the Department of Conservation and Cultural Heritage of the Estonian Academy of Arts, architectural historians, departments of the Tallinn City Government (planning service of the Strategic Management Office, Urban Environment and Public Works Department, Urban

¹ Public appeal regarding the establishment and renovation of nationally important cultural objects <https://estonia.icomos.org/index.php/2021/04/22/avalik-poordumine-riiklikult-tahtsate-kultuuriobjektide-rajamise-ja-renoveerimise-asjus/> (in Estonian), visited 07.11.2023.

² Estonia Theatre’s annex gets cooling-off time <https://news.postimees.ee/7240204/estonia-theatre-s-annex-getscooling-off-time>, visited 07.11.2023.

³ Port of Tallinn offering plot for national opera <https://news.postimees.ee/7245361/port-of-tallinn-offering-plot-for-national-opera>, visited 07.11.2023.

Planning Department and Transport Department). The aim of the discussion was providing input to the expert councils of the National Heritage Board and helping the National Heritage Board in reaching a decision on the matter. The experts did not consider it possible to build such a large annex, as it could only be done at the expense of public space and by damaging the previous values, including damaging the existing values of the Estonia Theatre and Drama Theatre, Tammsaare Park, archaeological heritage and the old town. The experts found that in a situation where Tammsaare Park, as a possible area for the annex, was reconstructed on a large scale a few years ago, the planning of an annex to the Estonia Theatre is not in accordance with the principle of sustainable development of urban space.

On May 10, 2021, a joint meeting of the expert councils of architectural monuments, archaeological heritage and landscape architecture took place. Experts in all three fields gave their opinion. The Expert Council of Archaeological Heritage: *“Decides not to consider it possible to build an annex to the Estonia Theatre in the ground and surface volumes shown in the sketch.”* The Expert Council of Landscape Architecture: *“Based on the historical formation and development of the green system surrounding Tallinn’s old town, the principle of preserving the bastion zone as a comprehensive system of attractive green areas, and the need to ensure the sustainable use of green urban space, the expert council does not support the planning of an annex to the Estonia Theatre.”* The Expert Council of Architectural Monuments: *“It is not possible to build a new stage and hall for Estonia Theatre in the size presented.”*

On May 18, 2021, the National Heritage Board gave its opinion on the proposal to build an annex to the Estonia Theatre: *“The Commission, based on the Heritage Conservation Act and the Statute of the Tallinn’s Old Town heritage conservation area, decided not to support the planning of an annex to the Estonia Theatre building in the size and location presented in the visualisation. With the large-scale annex of the theatre, the essence of the Estonia Theatre will be significantly changed, the characteristic views of the Estonia Theatre and the Drama Theatre next to it will be closed, the historic park will be destroyed, and the parts of the bastion zone preserved underground will be damaged.”*

At the end of 2022, a new version of the annex sketch was submitted to the heritage protection committee of the Tallinn Urban Planning Department. Compared to the first draft, the new version did not have major volume changes, and the committee gave its opinion: *“There are no fundamental changes in the presented solution compared to the previously presented annex solution, and the commission remains in its previous position.”*

A joint committee to deliberate the future of the Estonian National Opera

The City of Tallinn and the Estonian National Opera established a joint committee on September 29, 2022, to discuss the various theoretical possibilities for developing the Estonian National Opera. The committee's assignment was to jointly discuss and analyse the positions of the City of Tallinn and the needs of the Estonian National Opera for an annex or for a new building. The committee underlined that the discussion and analysis must be based on constraints imposed by urban planning, heritage protection, environmental protection, and other factors. The necessary spatial organisation for an opera theatre must also be considered. Another goal was to delineate and analyse alternative locations and opportunities for building an opera and ballet theatre and to formulate a position on the most suitable location.

In October 2023, the joint committee presented a summary of its work. The members of the committee remained on different positions and consensus was not found. The Estonian National Opera continues to want a large extension, but Tallinn continues to see no possibility to go ahead with a large extension due to heritage and nature conservation values and the resulting restrictions, as well as urban planning issues. In November 2023, the Estonian National Opera applied for special conditions for heritage conservation from National Heritage Board that are currently under preparation under Heritage Conservation Act, Planning Act and Statutes of Tallinn Heritage Conservation area, it is also envisaged to elaborate Heritage Impact Assessment to analyse potential impact of the possible annex to Estonia theatre on the Outstanding Universal Value of Historic Centre (Old Town) of Tallinn.