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Dispercity - new development approach for Estonian rural peripheries

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Abstract

Increasing number of people with flexible jobs and mobility and with more free time and resources, would like to spend more time in environment that combines the advantages of urban and rural life. They prefer urban qualities in clean and beautiful environment with full access to information networks, high mobility and advanced social and cultural services. We call this type of new settlement with term "*dispercity*". This change in European real estate market is creating new problems how to plan new type of settlement with modern technological standard and how to save nature and local culture from the people who like to move in it. We worked out basic principles and methods for dispersed city - how to integrate qualities of urban and rural environment, information technology and global-local lifestyles with local culture and how it will change existing settlement pattern in Estonian rural areas.

Introduction

Disperciry is the result of optimistic integration of rural environment, urban life quality, modern information technology and local cultural identity. Despite demographic processes (counterurbanization) and the popularity of environmental thinking, cities grow in all regions, together with the growing importance of urban lifestyle. The urban network is filling space between cities; there is still an increasing number of people with flexible jobs and mobility and with more free time and resources, who would like to spend more time in an environment that combines the advantages of urban and rural life (Spencer, 1995; Dahms and McComb, 1999). They prefer urban qualities in a clean and beautiful rural environment, with full access to information networks, high mobility and advanced social and cultural services. We refer to this type of new settlement using the term “*disperciry*” (Ahas et al 2000).

The aim of *disperciry* is not to use unidentified “rural space” for building but to value and enjoy local culture and environment as a “place to live”. This change in European rural areas and real-estate markets is creating new problems concerning how to plan the new type of settlement with modern technological standard and how to integrate and save nature and local culture with this new lifestyle (Keeble and Tyler, 1995). This problem has even wider implications for (is addressed even wider for) planners and architects because today there are very few visions of life style, life standard, and technological advances for more than 10 years ahead. Real-estate loans are planned for 20 years, master plans for 20-50 years, and infrastructure investments for 50 years. How to plan, build and buy housing to maintain its value during the loan period?

An important indicator of *disperciry* is sustainability, i.e. environmental and geoaesthetical harmony (Tjallingii, 2000; Ahas 1999). This includes environmental and social impact assessment of projects and land use changes, and landscape ecological analyses . *Disperciry*, as a modern and sustainable lifestyle in the natural landscape, also includes the need to use local energy, building materials, and ecological technologies for energy production and waste management. There is a need to develop the principles and model solutions for the best available ecological technology and energy sources due to the lower costs of local materials and energy sources in isolated locations (Mander et al 2001; Riera, 2001).

Estonian dispersity – repopulation of rural landscapes

The rapidly changing Estonian society, together with the globalising world, have also changed the system and meaning of settlement (Tammaru, 2000). In a geopolitical sense, Estonia has changed from Russia's west into Europe's east. This development has been primarily influenced by Scandinavia, the most active region in Europe (Jauhiainen, 2000). A powerful new Tallinn – Helsinki axis has emerged, governing all the significant Estonian settlement-related processes (Kulu and Tammaru, 2000). In Estonia, as in the rest of the world, the most striking feature is the increasing prominence of towns, with Tallinn acting as a magnet for the entire state, while Tartu, Pärnu and Jõhvi play the same role on a regional level. Sixty-nine percent of the Estonian population lives in towns, and 68 percent in regional centres in Harju, East Viru, Tartu and Pärnu counties. The most densely populated are the northern and coastal areas. Three of the five biggest Estonian towns are also located there: Tallinn, Narva and Kohtla-Järve, encompassing the majority of the population, industrial potential, transport network and economic activity. A peculiar aspect of the post-WW II intensive urbanisation and industrialisation was the fact that these processes occurred due to immigration from other Soviet republics. Rural settlement has been strongly influenced by various land reforms at different times. The greatest impact on contemporary villages was exerted by the land reform of the 1920s, after Estonia gained independence, which covered the lands suitable for cultivation with a network of smallholdings.

As an alternative to greater Tallinn, one of the future possibilities for Estonian settlement can indeed be to become a dispersed city – repopulation of natural landscapes and coastline of Baltic Sea. Somewhat surprisingly, the statistical data demonstrate a positive migration from town to country in Estonia, which means that the number of townspeople should be decreasing. Research, however, has shown that the actual migration is the opposite – from country to town. The probable explanation is that most people moving from town to country register at their new address, while those moving from country to town, on the other hand, do not. The formation of urban sprawl (unplanned and uncontrolled urban expansion along the network of transport routes) along all major roads actually constitutes one of the most characteristic features of the development of Tallinn. The area within a radius of 50 km of Tallinn is turning into the city's dormitory: people move away to small towns and to the country, seeking a higher-quality and more private environment. Tallinn's satellites now include Keila, Saue, Maardu, Kehra, Aegviidu, Loks and Paldiski, where a considerable part of the

Harju rural population now lives; this is also true of the coastal areas within a radius of 50 km of Tallinn (Kährik, 2000).

Rural settlement and the changing village

The spatial dispersal of Estonian rural settlement is quite different from the location of the towns. This has been, first of all, influenced by the differences between Higher and Lower Estonia, which in their turn have been shaped by natural conditions and forms of development. Estonian rural settlement has been greatly influenced by natural conditions and position: the settlement density map shows a clear dividing line between Higher and Lower Estonia. Although Higher Estonia, which is situated in Central, East and South Estonia, is only 50-150 m higher than Lower Estonia, which covers the West and North Estonia (up to 50 m above sea level), these areas nevertheless differ considerably, both in their nature, soil and settlement patterns (Palang et al 2000).

The areas of Higher Estonia where the landscape is much more diverse than in Lower Estonia, the soil is more fertile and there are more arable lands, are populated more or less evenly. Lower Estonia that was flooded by the Baltic ice lake and the waters of the Baltic Sea for a long time, contains large uninhabited areas mostly due to the extensive marshes and fens. Settlement has concentrated in lands with better natural and agricultural conditions and better possibilities for building (Mander et al 2000).

Besides natural conditions, rural settlement has been influenced by political and economic processes, i.e. land and ownership reforms (the latest land and ownership reform, started after Estonia re-gained independence, has not yet been fully completed) (Albre, 2000). Today's settlement and administrative divisions have mostly been shaped on the basis of manor houses. Here, too, regional differences play a significant role. North Estonian manor houses were smaller and more numerous; villages clustered around them and were mostly quite compact. South Estonian manor houses were bigger, and the villages were scattered, being to a large extent dispersed settlement areas. The buying of farms proceeded differently in North and South Estonia as well. An important process shaping rural settlement was the land reform that began in 1918, after Estonia became independent. Former manor house lands were covered by a network of scattered agricultural smallholdings. Even the Soviet collective farms and state farms failed to destroy this network. Big settlements emerged in the centres of successful collective and state farms, together with service sectors and production enterprises. With increasing wealth, it became fashionable to erect grand cultural centres, administrative buildings

and private houses. In the 1990s when the impact of the Russian market diminished, villages became considerably poorer. The second land reform, starting after the restoration of independence, returned the land that was illegally expropriated by the Soviet authorities, to the rightful owners. State-supported loans helped set up new farms. Agriculture, however, has not regained its previous significance, and people seeking better jobs keep moving from the country to the towns.

Higher Estonia's low population density area

Higher Estonia, situated on the South and Central Estonian hills and plain is covered with fertile soil, and has an evenly distributed settlement; therefore the general population density is relatively low, approximately 18 persons per square kilometre. The low density of the area is largely caused by the peculiarities of the hilly landscape that favoured the emergence of a dispersed settlement area. In addition to the variegated landscape and the widely dispersed but fertile farming areas, the region is also characterised by a very dense road network. A significant basis of the development of the dispersed settlement area was the ancient desire of the peasantry to have their own piece of land and live separately, without having to be in close contact with their neighbours. Also important was the policy of buying their own land: the peasants were only allowed to buy remote pieces of land of low quality. This is how the more distant areas beyond the forests were also populated. The first land reform of the Republic of Estonia resulted in covering all the former manor house lands with a dense network of smallholdings. Such areas have nevertheless largely retained their ancient settlement pattern, which was not destroyed by the Soviet collective farm villages.

Developing settlements of Lower Estonia

The Lower Estonian rural areas are relatively sparsely populated; people have gathered in villages situated on lands with favourable agricultural and building conditions. The West and North Estonian settlements, oriented to industry and service, have managed to retain their fields of activity. They are thus more prosperous than those in Central and South Estonia with their narrowly agricultural approach. The development of Lower Estonia is guaranteed by the closeness of towns and transport routes and more diverse opportunities for recreation thanks to the sea and summer resorts. Local development is also encouraged by the mobility of the population, and the tendency of people to leave and then return to the county. The coastal area is a special development resource: during

the Soviet period, most Estonian coastal areas were closed border zones, movement was restricted, local life went into decline, and only military enterprises were developed. With the opening up of the border zones, new possibilities arose for fishing, tourism and entrepreneurship (Raagmaa et al 2000).

The most sparsely populated areas are in the Lower Estonian inland, in the region of marshes and fens. *Estonia intermedia* reaches from south-west to north-east, crossing the whole of mainland Estonia, including the Pärnu depression and Kõrvemaa. The Võrtsjärv depression area north of Võrtsjärv, the north-eastern Alutaguse depression areas north of Lake Peipsi, and the relatively low marshy western part of mainland Estonia are sparsely populated (Albre 2000). The settlements in these regions abound in forest massive, large rivers and marshes, and the inhabitants are mostly engaged in forestry, hunting, local agriculture and small industrial enterprises. There are many nature reserves and tourist businesses in the area.

Conclusions

A disperscity emerges as a result of contra-urbanisation and the spread of distance work opportunities in the modern Internet society. Its purpose is to join the quality of urban life, information systems and natural environment into one modern environment. Ever more important while choosing a place to live is the diversity of space and geo-aesthetic aspects. People move inland, to the coast, forest and old towns, and restore old or build new houses. The network of tourism and the service sector is also expanding, along with coastal fishing and local production. This process is a clear alternative for farmers and entrepreneurs who have exhausted the fields of fishing, forestry and agriculture.

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