

# THE HIDDEN REVOLUTION

FANCY PARTYING IN A FORMER PRISON OR DRINKING COFFEE IN THE FACTORY WHERE SPUTNIK WAS MADE?

TALLINN'S NOTORIOUS SOVIET INSTITUTIONS ARE PART OF A NEW – SECRET – CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN THE CITY

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TALLINN



**ON THE OUTSKIRTS** of Tallinn's centre, less than a kilometre from its picturesque medieval Old Town, you'll find an imposing concrete reminder of Estonia's Soviet past. Located in the industrial Kristiine district, Polymer was one of the USSR's largest toy factories. In its heyday, around 1,200 workers were employed here, manufacturing ice-hockey pucks, foam figurines and, towards the end, basketballs.

Polymer's claim to fame, however, was that it also produced Misha, the USSR's cute mascot for the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games. The smiling bear was a huge merchandising success, coveted by children around the world and proudly touted by the regime as the cuddly face of communism. But it masked a more brutal truth: life for the workers who made the toy was far less cheery. Toiling long hours for hard taskmasters, they were offered no protection from the poisonous fumes that the latex and synthetic rubber gave off. Theirs was an arduous task that continued until manufacturing stopped in 1994.

How different things are today. Now, where fearsome apparatchiks once stalked drabily decorated corridors, you'll find Banksy-style graffiti and impressive art installations in every corner. Old factory doors hang on the walls, forming complex murals, while outside one window someone has hung a headless mannequin dressed in Victorian garb. That's because, since 2003, this entire complex has operated as an artist's colony, known as Polymer Kultuuritehas (*Ülase 16, 22 Madara; kultuuritehas.ee*). It's all part of a quiet cultural renaissance taking place in Tallinn.

In recent years, the city has developed – unfairly, it has to be said, for anyone who's ever seen the beautiful cobbled walkways – a reputation as a stag party destination. But at the same time, a burgeoning art

Previous page: a hallway in Patarei Prison. These pages, clockwise from above, artists and Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia founders Anders Härm and Neeme Külm; an art installation in front of the 19th-century Rottermann Factories, which have been given 21st-century glass towers by architect firm KOKO; the Polymer Kultuuritehas, once a toy factory and now an artists' colony; musician and artist Jarmo Nagel takes advantage of the nightclub space in the repurposed Patarei Prison



## During the Soviet era, Patarei

music and performance scene has sprung up, relatively unnoticed, in buildings that were once a crucial part of the old regime: abandoned factories, crumbling heating plants and even a former prison.

For decades, Russia used Estonia as a centre for its manufacturing industry. Within Tallinn, there were factories dedicated to making everything from bread to electromechanical equipment. When Estonia gained its independence in 1991, and went from being part of the world's largest country to one of its smallest, it had no use for the wastelands of factories left in the Soviet wake and for the next 12 years many fell in to disrepair.

But now the city's cultural elite are finding a thrilling use for them. Anyone going for a weekend stroll through Kalamaja, for instance – a neighbourhood comprised of industrial architecture

## was a KGB detention centre for political prisoners

and boarded-up warehouses – may be surprised to hear music spilling out from the deserted-looking buildings, many of which have been turned into ad-hoc nightclubs. But at the centre of it all, there's an even bigger eye-opener: they'll discover an old heating plant that is now the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (*in Estonian, Eesti Kaasaegse Kunsti Muuseum [EKKM], 35 Põhja pst; tel: (+372) 5663 6623, ekkm-came.blogspot.com*).

"The state of the place was poor," recalls Anders Härm, one of the artists who founded the museum, having discovered the space while looking for a place to squat. "There were a lot of homeless living here, the roof was broken and there was trash lying around."

EKKM is slowly winning a reputation in the art world and held its first proper exhibition last summer. Prior to its opening, there wasn't a contemporary art

museum in the city, so it now plays an important role in promoting young talent. "It was an establishment Tallinn both needed and lacked," says Härm. "It's about creating your own cultural atmosphere."

Of course, some buildings have an atmosphere all their own. Patarei (*6-124 Kihnu; tel: (+372) 504 6596, patarei.org*) is an imposing 20,000m<sup>2</sup> complex overlooking the coast that was built as a sea fortress in 1840 and then repurposed in 1920 as a correctional facility. Later, during the Soviet era, it was used as a KGB detention centre and political prisoners were often held there before going to trial.

Many executions took place at Patarei over the years and it cast a fearsome shadow over the nation until the last inmates were shuffled out in 2002. Now, on the weekends, droves of people clamour to get in to club nights held there. Barthol Lo Meior, one of the



“A lot of people in creative fields saw an opportunity”

Clockwise from bottom left: Jaanika Kuklase, director of art space Polymer Kultuuritehas; the old typesetting room in the former Polymer toy factory; Telliskivi's F-Hoone café has a Berlin dive-bar vibe; art covers the walls and is in every corner of the Telliskivi Cultural Centre



country's top DJs, played three raves there last year. He is drawn to Patarei, he says, because of the contrasts it presents. “It has a unique aura that's magical and mystical, and it's a ruthless place. The building is full of grim rooms, but it's on a beautiful beach.” He is referring to a concrete patch that Andrus Villem, who leases the prison from the government, has filled with sand, so it now doubles as an unexpected beach bar.

Despite its new appeal (films are also screened there), Patarei is an odd venue. Even by day, it's creepy. It's barely been cleaned since the facility closed, and old prison beds and faded girlie posters litter the cells. Villem rents it out for events and reckons parties average around 1,000 revellers. Most of the clientele learn of them from the website [rada7.ee](http://rada7.ee), Facebook pages of individual DJs or from posters plastered throughout Kalamaja.

Not far from the prison gates is another Soviet relic: Telliskivi Creative City (60A Telliskivi, [telliskivi.eu](http://telliskivi.eu)). It was once the workplace for many of the country's finest engineers and allegedly produced several parts for the Sputnik satellite, so it's fitting that it's now the centre of Tallinn's unofficial cultural orbit. Of its 11 buildings,

three have been renovated and turned into studio spaces and offices. Inside, the walls are decorated with art curated by the Soo Soo Gallery (4 Soo, tel: +372 642 2043, [soosoo.ee](http://soosoo.ee)), a contemporary art institution that rents space nearby. By 2013, it seems likely one of the factories will be turned into a theatre. There's also a thriving café, F-Hoone (tel: +372 680 1114). A favourite with an eclectic local crowd of designers and filmmakers, it has the kind of shabby-chic interior much beloved of Berlin dive bars; DJ events in the back room regularly bring in big crowds.

The impetus behind this movement isn't nostalgia for the past, but rather a desire to escape it. Gregor Laur, of the Estonian Academy of Arts, says the seemingly simple concept of creative freedom is relatively new for Tallinn's artists. “For so long, ‘west’ was a dirty word. Artists got very excited when they realised they could now imitate the West,” he says, pointing to the fact that Western art flooded the market there for several years. Then, after Estonia joined the EU in 2004 – one of the few Eastern Bloc countries to do so – the trend reversed, and Tallinn's artists went abroad, bringing back fresh inspiration.

The global economic crisis has also had a huge effect. In the case of Telliskivi, it's saved the area from total destruction. “In 2007, a real-estate investment fund bought this area,” explains Kaarel Oja, executive manager of the Telliskivi site. “The original plan was for them to take all these buildings down, but then the real-estate market crashed. It was clear that, for the next five or six years, there'd be no point in building anything new and a lot of people working in creative fields saw an opportunity.”

Alas, as the economy improves, the bohemian life that has grown up around these old buildings may cease to be – so the clock is ticking. “If the owner has another idea of what to do with this building one day, then we're out,” says Jaanika Kuklase, director of the Polymer project, in philosophical tone. “We don't know how long all this will last, so we just live day to day.”

So the message is clear: if you want to sample this very different side to Estonian life, do it now.

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