

# The Dwellers of Väikese Rannavärava

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P5 Reflection  
A Matter of Scale



## Abstract

The Dwellers of Väikese Rannavärava proposes a new kind of urban ecosystem within Tallinn's Old Town—one that promotes coexistence among diverse groups by creating a system of shared resources and unique contributions. The project offers what is currently missing in the area: a cohesive, resilient neighbourhood. Through the adaptive transformation of the Väikese Rannavärava Bastion, this intervention integrates everyday life with privatized activities, revitalizing both the space and its community.

## Site and Historical Context

The Väikese Rannavärava Bastion, while perceived as a 19<sup>th</sup> century heritage, was in fact rebuilt in 1986. Originally reconstructed for the Housing and Utilities Department, it later hosted the Tallinn Sports and Recreation Board, then the current Braavo Spa Hotel. Over time, the site became visually and functionally fragmented—its courtyard overtaken by parking leading to an ignored spatial potential. This project challenges that condition, recognizing the Bastion's significance as both a symbolic and physical threshold between the Old Town and the expanding city beyond.

## Approach and Methodology

The intervention started by the removal of all geometries that fragmented the site while preserving the perimeter walls, slabs and structural system. The four branches of the Bastion's geometry were transformed into four new buildings housing offices and residences on top of it. A fifth volume, positioned as counterpoint, accommodates the relocated hotel. Together, the Bastion and these five structures frame a new public square at the heart of the site.

This square—punctuated by urban furnitures offers spaces for both gathering and isolation. It is framed by a protected arcade which ensures year-round activities. Inspired by Piazza San Marco, the Bastion integrates small-scale commercial units at ground level. Above it, an urban terrace connects cafes and offices, encouraging vertical as well as horizontal activity. The arcade's colonnade on the ground floor continues upward into a rhythm of facades that breaks the horizontality of the Bastion into more elegant proportions together with the recessed upper floors.

Given the constraints of building atop an existing structure, the new additions employ a lightweight structural system using CLT and Glulam, minimizing impact on the foundations. Limestone cladding references the Old Town's textured historical palette, while timber interiors provide visual continuity with the structural system.

Through this, I have come to recognize that architectural aesthetics operate on many levels: rhythm, proportion, and texture are not just visual tools—they are instruments for creating coherence and legibility in complex urban environments.

## Urban Systems and Flexibility

One of the core challenges was reconciling different scales and materialities surrounding the site. The Bastion itself has a peculiar geometry and material language, while the surrounding urban tissue ranges from fine-grain heritage to infrastructural voids. This tension was addressed through spatial strategies: framing views, articulating entrances, layering depth, and activating edges.

Flexibility was a key principle throughout. Ground floor commercial spaces were designed with adaptable service zones and modular layouts, ensuring they can evolve as tenants change. Office floors are equally reconfigurable and oriented toward shared terraces. Residential units offer varied sizes and typologies, accommodating diverse lifestyles—from long-term residents to temporary visitors.

## Academic and Societal Values

This design is a proposal for what is crucially lacking in Tallinn Old Town: a true neighbourhood. One that is socially inclusive and economically vibrant. While the site was selected based on a threshold analysis that revealed a clear physical and symbolic separation from the Old Town, the design response—puncturing the site into smaller, human-scaled elements and the creation of a public square respond directly to this condition.

Much of my learning came through grappling with the question of how architecture can work across scales—not just buildings, but systems of use and occupation. Weeks of uncertainty and unproductive work revealed the limits of piecemeal problem-solving. Only by shifting toward a more systemic approach did the project begin to resolve itself.

I also acknowledge the ongoing debate about preserving Tallinn's historical appearance. But, as Alatalu<sup>1</sup> states, "today's creation is tomorrow's heritage." I believe that new interventions—if done with sensitivity, clarity, and care—can enrich heritage rather than diminish it. The Dwellers of Väikese Rannavärava is my contribution to that evolving dialogue.

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Alatalu, R. (2017, p.8). Estonian Cultural Heritage: Preservation and Conservation (Vol.2). Muinsuskaitseamet