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Lifestyle
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Photo: Takuji Shimmura

## October 1st – The Opening of the Estonian National Museum Building

Photos and a Q&A with the architects of the museum project – Dorell Ghotmeh Tane / Architects (DGT)

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Photo: Takuji Shimmura


On 1 October, in the Tartu suburb of Raadi, The Estonian National Museum (Eesti Rahva Muuseum) will be opening its doors as the largest and most modern museum/cultural center in the Baltic region.

Located on what was once a Soviet military airfield, this impressive, high-tech building dedicated to Estonian culture was designed by the Paris-based architectural offices of Dorell Ghotmeh Tane / Architects (DGT).

Taking into consideration the rather aggressive military legacy of the territory, the architects gave the project the fitting name of “Memory Field”, and they held quite close to this context when developing the concept for the project.

The project has been executed as a 350-meter-long glass building with a kilometer-long outdoor section that extends onto the old runway.

After walking the length of the muted-gray one-story building, visitors are meant to head out onto the airfield, towards “infinity”, i.e., the “memory field” – an expansive public space which will eventually hold large-scale outdoor sculptures and host events. The first 150 meters will be used for exhibitions and performances that adhere to the museum’s thematic subjects, whereas the remaining 280 meters will be handed over to artists for the creation of presentations that will change on an annual basis.



The architectural team responsible for the project (Dan Dorell, Lina Ghotmeh, and Tsuyoshi Tane) answered the following questions for [Artterritory.com](http://Artterritory.com).

**What should everybody know about Dorell Ghotmeh Tane / Architects (DGT)? What would be a concise introduction for yourselves?**


We believe that a creative process involves an archaeology of the physical, historical and social traces

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layered in the project's place and time. This Archaeological Process – conducted in the form of in-depth research on the context, the client's vision, and the users of the projects – represents an important design tool and becomes an 'integral' part of the project that generates the 'global specificity' of it. We also believe that the richness of Architecture comes from the fact that it is contingent upon other disciplines. We constantly seek to collaborate with professionals from different disciplines and backgrounds: Innovative Engineers, Artists, Designers, Scientists, and Sociologists. In this same quest for multi-disciplinarity, we believe that the client plays a primordial role in the design process.



**How did the work on this museum project differ from work on any other architectural building?**

Winy Maas – principal of the cutting-edge dutch architectural firm MVRDV, and a member of the jury in this competition – stated: 'It is not very common that one gets the chance to design and execute a project for a new cultural institution representing a nation's identity.'

**Does the new building's design contain any references to the old museum's architecture?**

The collections of the Estonian National Museum are comprised of objects from the early to late periods, mostly textiles of various types representing Estonia's material culture in times past and present. A museum of ethnic heritage displaying the life and culture of the nation in its temporal, spatial, and social diversity functions in reconciliation and rivalry with the new emerging pop culture which, in modern days, finds its expression through visual means: the media, fashion, travel and lifestyle. The Jury was looking for a design that would assign the new museum complex an active role in the new global pop culture, a design that would transcend national boundaries and transform the rather passive, "dusty" attitude towards the museum into an active, even "hip" approach that would attract the younger generation and be functional and competitive in the international context.



**What is your vision – how will the building connect the public to the cultural institution?**

The creation of the new Estonian National Museum is a testament to the quest for reawakening a pride in national identity and a unique cultural history. The international competition for the design and execution of the 34 000 m<sup>2</sup> building, housing a collection of 140 000 objects, was launched in 2005 and won by the international architecture office Dorell Ghotmeh Tane / Architects (DGT).

Our proposal for this Museum challenged the competition brief. Instead of locating the building on the proposed site, we chose to reappropriate a nearby former Soviet military base as the setting for the Museum – a physically present 'ruin' of a painful history.

We believed that the new Museum should play an essential role in the regeneration of the area, and to do so, it had to start by dealing with this heavily charged and spatially unique place. With a sensitive implementation on this site, the National Museum becomes a continuation of the airfield – its roof lifting and expanding towards 'infinite space' – inviting the visitor to enter into the landscape and into the heart of the museum.

Our design creates an open house for public activities – exhibition, performance, learning – a place of



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gathering and interaction, bringing people together to celebrate a rich, if sometimes painful, history.



**What are the architectural components that every fan of contemporary architecture should pay attention to (materials, shapes, rhythm solutions, etc.)?**

A 73m-wide and 1km-long stretch of existing airfield has been appropriated into our intervention. Its spatial quality and proportions, as a platform cutting into the middle of the landscape, allows it to have a regulatory impact on the site surrounding it. This Space is also defined by the different elements surrounding it. The first intervention tightly linked to this platform would be the New Estonian National Museum that opens this platform into unique/large-scale events and artistic interventions (e.g.: festivals, music concerts, cultural events, the Land-artist Andy Goldsworthy, the Artist-Sculptor Louise Bourgeois, the Artist Anish Kapoor...). While in the northwestern part of the site we preview a cultural and educational development, the area directly surrounding the museum will be conserved as a 'green' forested part. In this context, the 'Memory Field' is generating, and being generated, by its surroundings.



**Which elements draw attention in terms of innovation and technological solutions?**

The building deals with the environmental challenges of today. It aims at being a passive energy building that would consume the least energy. The museum's collection needs a special climate in order to be conserved. Normally, this part of the museum would consume a considerable amount of energy. Normally, storage spaces should have a constant temperature and a relative humidity setting between 40%-60%.

In order to considerably reduce the amount of energy consumed in the lifetime of the building, the museum opted for a rather passive system for the conservation of the museum's artifacts:

- The storage spaces are to be located in the basement and surrounded by a very-well-insulated wall and covered by ground, so as to keep the space out of a situation of excessive heat exchange.
- As humidity is the main problem that would affect the artifacts, the basement shall be built with "autoclaved concrete", a material that is porous and that would retain excess humidity and release the humidity when it is lacking in the space. This material will allow the museum to considerably save energy (that would have been needed for climatization), and keep a constant humidity.
- As for the temperature, there will be no need to keep a constant temperature by this system. The variation of the temperature is less of a potential harm for the collection.



**Is there any possible architectural provocation in this design? Does it have any secrets?**

Through linking our proposal for the new Estonian National Museum to the existing dismantled military airfield, there is a clear intention to transform its meaning and history in order to appropriate it into the national grounds of the museum. In order to strongly express this connection, it is not enough to simply build a museum that sits on this platform. The link shall be stronger so that the museum is felt as a real extension of the grounds of the runway. In this case, it is the museum's roof that shall meet the runway's grounds. At this point of intersection, it is the new museum that appropriates the location into its stories and summons the runway. In this context, the activities that will happen on this platform will be linked to the museum's nature, and the airfield is to be zoned into three parts : 1. The first 150 m are to be reconstituted (in resemblance with the existing, i.e., concrete flooring with a 7x7m grid) and are part of the museum construction site. This part shall be redesigned in a very subtle way as an intersection point between the airfield and the museum building. This first platform facing the museum will be also used for exhibitions and performances that would directly relate to the different events happening inside the building, and more specifically, to the public space along this part of the museum. It would offer a pleasant public space in the summer- or spring-time of Estonia, and a public art intervention platform throughout the year.

The second 280m of the airfield are being kept in their existing state, and are zoned for future artist interventions. This part will be divided into strips of 7mx70m. Each year an artist will be assigned to intervene in one 7x70m block, to express the passing year in Estonia.

This creates a public art platform out of this area, and insures the conceptual continuity of the museum institution into this 'to-be-appropriated' platform.



**What are your personal feeling towards Estonian cultural heritage, and the idea for the museum, in general?**

The new National Museum is built upon its own historical context; it appropriates the urban opportunity of the site, and links the prior airfield platform with its own roof. It plays on different urban scales a game of existence/disappearance. When approached from the "normal" city street (Vahi St.), it appears as an extension of the adjacent cellars. It breaks down into the scale of its surrounding context from this first entrance, only to contain a spatial turnover towards the end of the promenade, where the museum opens up its own limits towards its roof – an infinite ground representing a second 'Entrance' to the same space of the new ENM. Approaching the site from Vahi St., the museum announces itself through an extended "canopy-roof" that covers a potential public space. Two simple, translucent planes shift in an intersection to allow for an entrance point. The latter takes you to the first 'Outer' part of the museum: a part where the public and independently operable functions of the museum are located. In this same part, the roof is suddenly de-materialized and a silent point occurs – a cut over the lake: an overhanging bridge embracing a restaurant with views of the historical elements of the site. A contemplation point directed towards the old ENM, the distillery, and the various items of 'debris' constituting the history of this area of Raadi... An intense point is where the suspension of this part of the ENM building is

intersected with external events – by way of the bicycle route that passes through underneath. This “cut” in the museum – where the landscape and the Estonian trees create texture for this first, independently operable part of the museum’s space – marks a transitional point in your experience. It comes as a smooth opening into the exhibition of Estonia’s historical narrative.

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