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: Takeo Shimazawa

On 1st October, in the Tõniste suburb of Rae, the Estonian National Museum (Narva Museum) will be opening its doors as the largest and most modern museum and 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 hold quite close to this context when developing the concept for the project.

The project has been executed as a 90-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-storey 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 300 meters will be used for exhibitions and performances that adhere to the museum’s thematic subjects, whereas the remaining 150 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 (Dorell, Lina Ghotmeh, and Tsugoshi Tane) answered the following questions for ARtErRitory.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
How did the work on this museum project differ from work on any other architectural building?

Willy Munnik, 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 a complex active role in the newglobal pop-culture, a design that would transcode national boundaries and transform the rather passive, "stately" 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 m² building, housing a collection of 140,000 objects, was launched in 2005 and won by the international architecture office Dorrer Ghorshch Toma 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 'traces' 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 heavyly 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...
gathering and interaction, bringing people together to celebrate a rich, if sometimes painful, history.

A 7km-wide and 15km-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. 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-Assemblage Kippen...). While in the northeastern part of the site we provide 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 drew 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% and 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 disused 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 on the disused airfield. The link shall be stronger so that the museum is felt as a real extension of the grounds of the airfield. In this case, it is in the museum’s roof that shall meet the airfield’s grounds. At this point of intersection, it is the new museum that appropriates the location into its stories and narratives 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 1,50 m are to be reconstituted (in resemblance with the existing, i.e., concrete flooring with a 757x700 cm) 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 2,80m 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 757x700 cm, each year an artist will be assigned to intervene in one 757x700 cm block, to express the passing year in Estonia. This creates a public art platform out of this area, and ensures the conceptual continuity of the museum institution into this ‘to-be-upgraded’ 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 and game of existences/disappearances. When approached from the “normal” city street (Vahla St.), it appears as an extension of the adjacent buildings. It breaks down into the scale of its surrounding context from its 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 ESM. Approaching the site from Vahla St., the museum announces itself through an extended ‘canopy rooftop’ 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 latter an overhanging bridge embossing a restaurant with views of the historical elements of the site. A contemplation point directed towards the old ESM, the distillery, and the various items of ‘debris’ constituting the history of this area of Raud... An intense point is where the suspensor of this part of the ESM building is
interacted 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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