



**ABANDONED BUILDINGS AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**  
**The Example of the Ruins**  
**of Estonian Orthodox Churches**

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*Juuru orthodox church in the making 1892-96.  
T. Parmakson private photo collection*

## Introduction

My choice of theme is based on the actual problem I came across while working for Estonian National Heritage Board and participating in an inventory of the church ruins. Namely, a number of abandoned and ruined orthodox churches can be found all over Estonia's countryside. This leads inevitably to a question what to do with this kind of landscape elements: do they have a chance to become a place of worship again or can they be adapted to some new function. So called "euthanasia" cannot also be ruled out, in which case we should let a hopelessly decayed building quietly wither or in the danger of collapsing pull it down. As this research for obvious reasons cannot decide the fate of different buildings, I came about an idea to investigate the social background of why and how situation like this has occurred. For that I needed to know what local people think about these ruinous churches located in their vicinity, and if there exists some kind of interest in them. I have to admit that in the beginning of the research I was pretty pessimistic about the results. It seemed to me that the abandoned buildings are primarily the result of society's neglect and lack of interest. For that reason I was intrigued by the question of public involvement in the matter of preserving the buildings. I was interested if the church ruins even qualify for locals as a genuine problem worth of concern. This question was made intriguing by the fact that buildings under survey are not national heritage for granted. Many of them are not under protection, reason being mostly that they were built by the widespread type-projects in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and are not always considered architecturally valuable. Their value is more of local nature. The other intriguing question is political: namely, the churches were built in the era of Russification of Estonia and there was a chance that this could be an obstacle for some patriotic people to treasure them as national heritage. But just for these ambiguous reasons was I drawn to the theme, because it seemed more exiting to investigate heritage which is not so clear-cut valuable yet.



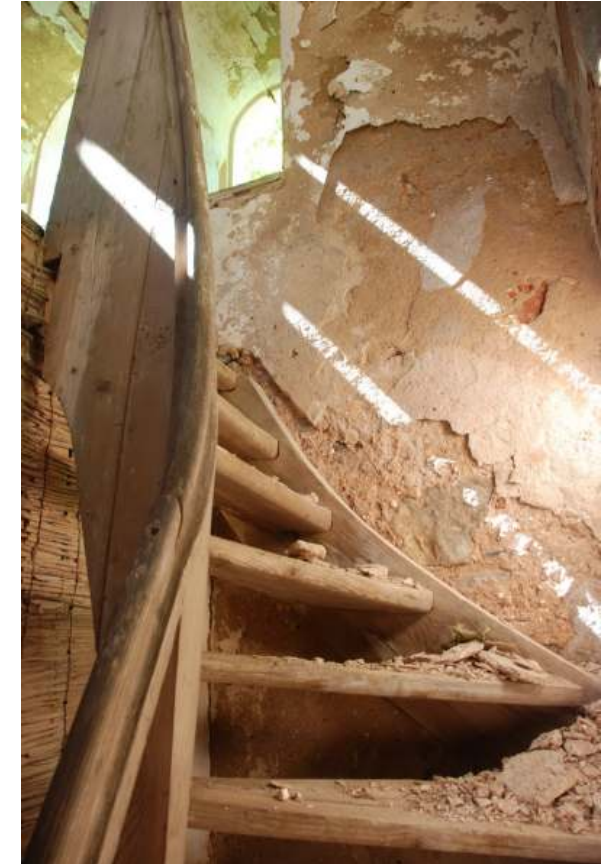
*Penuja orthodox church  
Photo: Mati Lohu 2008*

Hypothesis I put up in the beginning of the research was that the sad state of the church ruins was the result of local community's lack of ownership. This would be mainly due to the fact that most of the ruins mentioned belong to Estonian Orthodox Church organization (EOC). Some of them have still not been returned to the original owner and therefore belong to local municipality or don't have legal ownership at all. But the main questions I tried to find an answer were: **Could it be possible somehow to involve local people in the adaptation of the church ruins? How to raise their interest in the matter?**

I prepared a small **questionnaire** which contained questions about people's current opinion of the church ruins in their area and their possible involvement in the adaptation process. Notice should be taken that the survey inevitably had to be limited, primarily for the reason it was carried out abroad. Working from the distance I was only able to question via e-mail. The people involved in the questioning were on higher positions in their county or more than average interested in the cultural matters (museum workers etc). The theme on the other hand requires much more "going to the people". That's why the results were destined to be a little one-sided. For that reason I consider the research to be kind of a pilot project which definitely requires more thorough survey in the future.

Another matter which is lightly touched in my survey is the theme of **environment**. As I consider the ruins partly to be a subject in environmental matters, and as also public involvement is better represented in the environmental decision-making, I decided to draw some parallels with this area in the sense of sustainable development. However, this was not the main subject of my paper and should only be taken as stimulation for further thinking: could maybe cultural heritage be more represented in the environmental decision-making process in the future?

**First part** of my research tries to explain the background concerning ruins in general and Estonian orthodox churches ruins in particular. **Second part** in the beginning asks the question: Why to involve public? Answer is based on an international convention about environment. This follows the introduction of the questionnaire and its results. **Third part** of the survey tries to give some future vision for the church ruins deriving from the research results.



*Penuja orthodox church  
Photo: Mati Lohu 2008*

## 1 BACKGROUND

**1.1 Abandoned buildings as symbols of era.** Everything decays. For to preserve something we have to fight all the forces of the world where perish is a natural part of life. If a building is abandoned and it loses its function it becomes a ruin. For the ruin to be preserved, the society must have a strong motivation to fight the decay. This means that the ruin must be of significance to us. If not, is there a point to keep a “corps” alive?

In every era some buildings are abandoned. A typical abandoned building in our times is a church. This has happened in the history before: for example in Germany the churches have been abandoned also in the beginnings of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (MAYR 1996: 142).

Many of these buildings have been adapted to new use by now, be it museum, school or concert-hall etc (*Ibid*). David Lowenthal refers to the analogues people tend to draw between decaying materials and human body frailty and illness (LOWENTHAL 1997: 143). This leads to a thought that seeing a building in ruins is for a person with conscience like seeing a sick and helpless human being. You inevitably feel the need to do something about it. There also exist people who enjoy the feeling of hopelessness and nostalgia ruins trigger in us and even wish to prolong it. Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720 - 1778) was one of the first to discover the beauty in Roman ruins and with his prints introduced the allure of decay to Europe. But isn't maybe the endeavor to revive the ruins only incapacity to let go and give up the past? Who would take the responsibility for “euthanasia”?



*When is the time to let go?  
Laiuse orthodox church 2009*

Finally we reach the theme of my research, namely the concept of public involvement. I assume that if any building or ruin becomes a part of social conscience, the means for preserving it will be found. Could this be the case with the orthodox church ruins? On the other hand, in case buildings mentioned are not recognized as common heritage, do we have the right to keep them alive by force? Would it be possible to increase the interest among local people towards the ruins?

**1.2 Ruins of Estonian orthodox churches.** Hereby I give a short historical as well as present day background of the orthodox church ruins. After the reformation Estonia became a protestant-lutherian country. Orthodox churches were built in the **second part of 19<sup>th</sup> century** in the time Estonia was part of czarist Russia. Religious change among people began in Livonia (Southern part of Estonia) 1845 and moved to Northern Estonia in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Reasons for people to change their religion were primarily political: joining the state religion gave them hope to gain some benefits and land. The boom for changing the belief in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century was succeeded in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century by the wave of disappointment when hoped advantages were not achieved. Many country congregations had to fight the problem of their members leaving the congregation to go back to the more familiar lutherian church. As the congregations already grew smaller during Estonian independence period (1918–1939) they didn't manage to outlive the pressure machine of Soviet power after WWII. Many churches were left empty and were taken sometimes to the use of kolkhozy-sovhozy as economic establishments (mills, storages etc).

Till **present day** most of these buildings have been given back to their original owner – Estonian Orthodox Church (EOC), but because of the lack of local congregation and financial means they stay empty and without maintenance still. For all above mentioned reasons, the ruins of orthodox churches have become a part of Estonian landscape, carrying in their neglect a symbolic as well as an esthetic meaning. They are destined to perish if a new function is not adapted.

Some of the ruins are enlisted as national cultural heritage but **taking under protection** has been quite random however. Being built by type projects popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there occur many similar churches all over the country. This is sometimes the reason why the evaluation of these buildings has varied in different counties. It is obvious that there has been no overall view about the orthodox churches to carry out adequate evaluation. Compared with medieval churches there hasn't been enough research, in fact no survey has been published yet. It has happened often that a widespread type project which also is in bad condition has been listed while some unique original architecture is neglected. On the other hand, we have to admit that in the case of ruinous buildings, legal protection isn't really the first



*Juuru orthodox church was in the Soviet era used as a mill and storage.  
Photo: V. Rinaldo 1980*

priority because protection is only needed when it's actually effective. In this case the main threats to the buildings are forces of nature and vandals, against whom some formal protection is absolutely useless.

However, let the general evaluation of orthodox churches be the theme for some other paper, I will try to discuss them more as the landscape elements of regional value, which may or may not be treasured by the local community. The main subject of my interest is not of art historical nature but deals more with the **sustainable development of the environment**, which requires of us valuing the local resources which are already there and urges us to reuse them instead of establishing new and energy consuming ones. The buildings under research are in fact themselves result of energy efficient thinking model, because they were erected in the era when using local materials in the building was taken for granted. Every village had its own lime burning pit, which supplied with necessary bonding and plaster material needed for building. Furthermore, every region of the country gives its own unique appearance to the churches because of the local stone: grayish-brown granite and red brick in the South and pale white and yellow limestone in the North. According to the taste of the era, buildings were often left without a plaster which also reveals local materials. Wooden churches and also construction details of the stone churches were made of timber from the local forests. Despite of present-day sad situation, we can still admire the good work of the old craftsmen, because the walls and details are still sometimes in pretty fine shape regardless of the missing or leaking roof. Also, the wooden material was very carefully chosen.

How could it be possible to take usage of these church ruins again by the local community, considering the standards of sustainable development?



*Walls reveal history  
Mäemõisa orthodox church 2008*

## 2 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

### 2.1 Why involve people?

Public involvement is a principle which has been much discussed lately concerning the environmental issues and decision-making. Less talk has been about cultural heritage in this case, although it is a subject of environment at least to some extent. Ruins belong to our landscape which being a subject of Environmental Impact Assessment connects cultural heritage with the environment. As I couldn't find any example of public involvement in cultural heritage concerned decision-making, I will draw some parallels with a convention about environment. I would like to point out 5 principles taken from Aarhus convention preamble to back up some arguments, why the ruins are connected with the environment and why public involvement is important in the environmental issues as well as in this particular case.

Aarhus Convention (made 1998, ratified 2001): Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters.

*Affirming the need to protect, preserve and improve the state of the environment and to ensure sustainable and environmentally sound development.*

Ruins are a part of environment and proper handling of these can in important extent improve the environment. Furthermore, taking use of existing resources is in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.

*Recognizing also that every person has the right to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being, and the duty, both individually and in association with others, to protect and improve the environment for the benefit of present and future generations,*

Neglected buildings are in risk of collapsing and therefore insecure objects in the local living-environment. We have a duty in collaboration with each other to preserve and improve our environment for generations to come and this certainly includes local built heritage.



*Ruins are a part of our living-environment  
Maaritsa orthodox church 2008*

*Recognizing that, in the field of the environment, improved access to information and public participation in decision-making enhance the quality and the implementation of decisions, contribute to public awareness of environmental issues, give the public the opportunity to express its concerns and enable public authorities to take due account of such concerns,*

Public involvement in the decision-making process about the ruins gives an opportunity to draw better conclusions for every party and also raises the interest towards the objects.

*Desiring to promote environmental education to further the understanding of the environment and sustainable development and to encourage widespread public awareness of, and participation in, decisions affecting the environment and sustainable development,*

Being part of the restoration process of the ruins could be an excellent opportunity to raise the awareness about the sustainable development issues and do it in the example of local culture.

*Convinced that the implementation of this Convention will contribute to strengthening democracy in the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE),*

If we recognize that the ruins are local community's common heritage, then in the democratic society people should have a right to participate in the decision-making as one of the stakeholders.



*What kind of landscape do we prefer?  
Vormsi orthodox church 2008*

## **2.2 Inquiry**

**2.2.1 Purpose.** In the beginning the purpose of the inquiry was to find out if my hypothesis about churches being neglected because of local people's lack of interest was grounded or not. I wanted to find an answer to the question if ruins are valued as common heritage or do people think of it as a foreign property. Additionally, I wanted to know if in case of interest there could be found people who would also participate in the restoration process itself. Furthermore, I made an inquiry if there could be some adaptive use to the ruins. The results were meant to give some kind of overview about the future perspective for the orthodox church ruins which could maybe be helpful in managing the state programme for restoration of churches held by National Heritage Board.

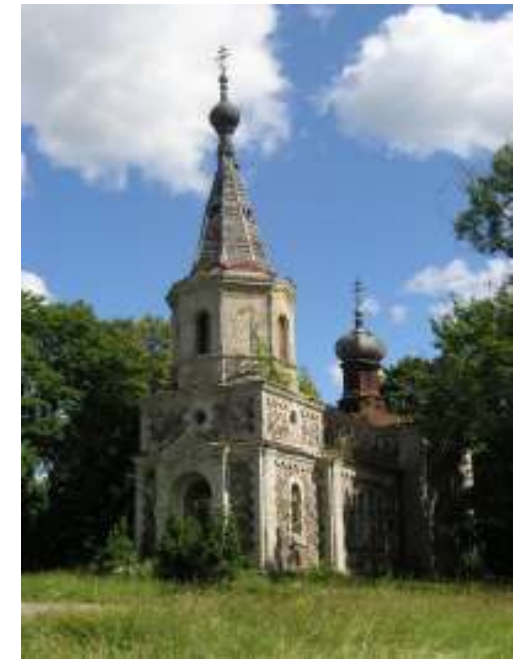
**2.2.2 Methodology and target group.** The results of the inquiry were destined to be limited from the beginning, reason mostly being the small scale of it. The scale was limited for several causes. Firstly, I only questioned people living close to the church ruins I had investigated myself during inventory in summer 2008. I found this approach sensible, because the results of the inquiry would be supplemented by my own documentation. The other reason for limitation of the survey was a fact that I was carrying it out from the distance, which set restrictions to the target group. I could only question people who were working in some kind of local institutions and who's e-mail address was available in the internet. Most of the respondents were local municipality workers, members of NGO's, employees in the field of culture and education, church leaders. Inevitably this influenced the results of the inquiry. On one hand the results were more positive than expected and interest towards the ruins stronger because of the respondents having higher education than average. On the other hand we can also say that being on higher ranks in local community they probably have better overview of the regional life and politics. All the participants had to send the questionnaire back by their own initiative, which also characterizes the target group as more than average interested in the matter. All others could just ignore the e-mail.

As mentioned, my survey had such a small scale that there would not be wise to derive statistics from it. That is why I'm only going to deliver the questions asked and give some free-style overview and comments about the results.

### **2.2.3 Questionnaire**

#### **1) Do you find ... orthodox church ruins to be an object of cultural heritage value which should be preserved?**

All participants answered YES. However, this result is not as predictable as it may seem. As mentioned above, many of these buildings are not national cultural monuments. Besides, in these regions there are not that many people left who would feel some connection with the orthodox religion. If there had been possibility to carry out the questioning in every layer of the society, the result probably would not have been so positive. During my work I've heard several opinions of orthodox churches being not as valuable as for example lutherian ones. Positive result of this question derives possibly from the abovementioned limitation of the target group.



*Väike-Lähtru orthodox church 2008*

**2) Which solution in your opinion would be most suitable, if the ruins to:**

- a) demolish because of the danger of collapsing;**
- b) secure and preserve in the present state as a romantic landscape element;**
- c) restore / adapt for a new use?**

More than a half of the respondents preferred the option B, which is probably the result of realistic approach, because it requires less finances than adaptation for a new use. Next preference was option C. Only one of the respondents answered that the best solution would be to demolish the ruin because the conservation had already become impossible. But in this case the church was the only wooden building in the survey and truly in a very bad state. However, it is important to mention that in spite of the demolition preposition the respondent still recognized the church as valuable.

**3) In case of a new use, which function do you consider most suitable:**

- a) church / house of worship;**
- b) centre of culture, exhibition / concert hall, museum etc;**
- c) other?**

More than a half of the respondents preferred the option B, by which exhibition- or concert hall and museum function was considered most suitable. Some of the answers preferred church / house of worship function. This function was favored when the respondent was a clergyman or there existed a cell of congregation in the region. Only one of the respondents thought that the church could be in some other use but didn't specify which.



*Märjamaa orthodox church 2008*

**4) In your area, is there a need for some kind of space / establishment, which could take usage of adaptation of the church ruins? Which?**

Nobody answered firmly YES, however most of the respondents thought that the need for this kind of space was MAYBE there. Exhibition hall and worship hall was named. Only one of the respondents reckoned that in the local area there is no this kind of need. It seems that maybe the local people haven't really thought about this matter yet but if to give some time for common discussion, there might arise more ideas. There also appears to be some difficulties in thinking "outside the box" and propose some non-traditional options (hotel, apartments etc) which have been used in other countries.

**5) Does there exist an interest group which could be involved in the restoration of the church?**

For this question answers divided more evenly. The same number of respondents thought that this kind of group does and doesn't exist. Almost half of the answerers were unsure.

**6) Can it be said that the local people consider the church ruins their common heritage?**

The purpose for this question was to find out if despite the fact that the church ruins belong in most cases to Estonian Orthodox Church organization, do local people feel common ownership over them, considering the fact that these buildings are part of their living-environment. The answers were again more positive than expected, because almost half of the respondents were convinced that the church ruins are their common heritage indeed. Half of the answerers thought that it was maybe so. Only one respondent didn't believe it to be true.

**7) If the local people would be incorporated to the decision-making process, do you think they would show up an interest to restore the ruins?**

For this question equally YES and MAYBE were answered. This means that in the matter of public involvement nobody was strictly in the negative opinion. This gives hope to assume that people's interest towards the ruins would be stronger if they had a chance to be involved. This moreover could deepen the feeling of common ownership and be finally useful to all the parties because it would help to preserve the buildings.



*Ceiling detail in Vormsi orthodox church 2008*

**8) Do you think that some local people would be interested in taking part of the conservation process?**

Also to this question nobody answered negatively. More than a half thought that this kind of people exist in local community. The others stayed a little skeptical, answering "maybe".

**9) Do you consider it realistic to find financial support from some funds (National Heritage Board, EU structural funds, local municipality etc) for the restoration of the church?**

Surprisingly, quite many respondents were convinced that finding financial support is possible. More than a half thought it maybe possible. Only one respondent didn't believe it to be realistic. However, in the time of economic crisis so positive answers were not to be expected, but on the other hand it gives hope that there might be some initiative among the local people to apply for financial support.

**10) Comments if wished:**

I will hereby display some comments from the respondents which give some additional information. In the brackets the region is mentioned where it's from.

*People are interested in the ruins and consider it their common heritage, but the church belongs now to EOC and they haven't done anything to maintain it. Local municipality has tried to contact them but in vain. (Juuru)*

*On 16th of May 2009, a day of common work was organized by NGO Heritage Round Table all over the country. On that day a group of local people with the help of some other people from Tallinn did a lot of work around and inside the church: cleaning from trash, removing Soviet era additions, cutting down trees. An NGO for restoring of the church was formed as well as a cell of congregation. (Vormsi)*

*First interest should be taken by the owner of the building. (Märjamaa)*

*Local people and municipality showed a good will some 10 years ago when the conservation of the building in time-being state was carried out. Meanwhile EOC got back it's land and buildings and even sold some land to the developers but hasn't touched the church since. Now the building has turned into a ruin. (Märjamaa)*

*If there should be any funding then the only possibility would be EU structural funds, but it requires some kind of interest group who would at least write the projects. (Maaritsa)*



Maaritsa orthodox church 2008

### 3 VISION FOR THE FUTURE

How could the orthodox church ruins look like in 10 years? Without intervention the forces of nature will have done their work and savable material will be gone in most cases.

In case to the fate of the buildings will be intervened, there appear several options. Most simple and less finance-requiring is to **conserve the building in the present day state** which primarily means putting up and repairing the roofs. Why not supply the ruins with information stands and establish tourist routes.

Being restored as a church and place of worship leaves me a little skeptic. Even if local congregation is created, it would not be very practical to take this massive building, which has been built for much bigger congregation, into use as a place for service. However, if this would be the case, the restored space must definitely be multifunctional. Indeed, **multifunctional** is the keyword for the future of these buildings in my opinion. There has to be more thorough survey carried out about what are the needs for local community. Trying to think “outside the box” can then provide creative solutions.

An important question is the question of the **ownership**. Despite the fact that the buildings belong to EOC, there should definitely be a right given to the local community to say out their opinion. The main ground for this being that the ruins affect their every-day environment the most. Another question is: Is there really a need to keep the buildings in EOC-s possession if there’s no local congregation and finances? It could also be possible to reach the conclusion which is acceptable for everybody, for example give to the church besides congregation hall also a function of guesthouse, conference center or museum. In any case a thorough discussion between EOC, municipality and local community needs to be carried out.



*Mäemõisa orthodox church 2008*

From the point of view of the **heritage protection**, the sensible overview about the orthodox churches should be made: Which buildings would need more definite requirements and which not? If the question is in the remaining or disappearing of the buildings, I would rather support more flexible consideration of the adaptation. On the other hand, preserved material deserves a respective attitude and even in the case of the non-listed buildings, a suggested approach should derive from the good conservation tradition to change as much as necessary but as little as possible.

Therefore, there are as much options and solutions to take usage of the ruins as there are objects and in the end the decision should be made about every case separately. The main problem remains about the financial sources. But looking at the results of the questionnaires, local people are not as pessimistic about this as it may seem. There is a need for initiative project-writers, who would do the work on the spot. Further thinking requires the idea that maybe there should be a consultant in every region who would help the locals in these matters and encourage them. The economic crisis can be the right time to start to think about sustainable development and try to take more use of EU structural fund supports to lighten up regional economy.

To sum up, in 10 years an optimist is seeing, instead of the ruins, creative community centers adapted to local people's needs, a pessimist a heap of old stones in a need to be carried away. The results of the questionnaire gave a little hope to the optimist. Time will show who is right.



*Märijamaa orthodox church 2008*

## **Conclusion**

Trying to answer the question posed in the beginning, if there is a way to involve local people to the decision-making about the orthodox church ruins in Estonia and how it would be possible to raise their interest in the matter, I have to admit there is no too clear-cut answer yet. The results of the questionnaire gave hope that despite the fact that the buildings are in the possession of EOC, people still feel connected to them and are interested in the restoration process. Still, as the inquiry was limited we can't draw too definite conclusions. For better adaptation of the churches further surveys are needed to find out the needs of different regions. I hope my inquiry made some people more aware of the matter and maybe gave ideas to think about.

However, even if all generalizations are inappropriate at this point, there is one thing that's certain: in every region handled, there were at least few people who were interested enough in the orthodox church ruins to answer my questionnaire, and that's something to start with!



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