



# Prioritizing Arts on the Baltic

## A Former Soviet Military Airstrip in Estonia becomes the Site for a National Museum

In 2005 the Estonian government decided to stage an international competition as a means of selecting a design for a new National Estonian Museum.

There was already a Museum of Estonian History in Tallinn, the capital, so one might have assumed that this was one factor in the decision to locate it in the second largest city, Tartu. One might ask, 'why is this such a big deal, when we are only talking about a small country with a population of less than two million?'

Since this museum's emphasis is heavily weighted toward illustrating the country's finno-ugric origins, both in language and tribally, Estonia's Russian neighbor could hardly interpret this as a friendly gesture—considering over forty percent of Estonia's population is currently Russian. It wasn't always that way. Russian influence and the migration of Russian speakers to Finland coincided with the end of World War II and the Cold War. Estonia's attraction to Russians during that era was not only

linked to the region as a hightech center; with that came a slightly higher living standard.

When the breakup of the Soviet Union and the simultaneous recreation of independent Baltic States occurred in 1989, the Estonian majority took power, and concurrently, made Estonian the official language of the country. If this wasn't enough, its cultural positioning to Finland and the West has intensified with its membership in the EU and NATO. Since then, a delicate balance has been struck between the two cultures; but the rise of Russian nationalism under Putin could spell trouble internally for Estonia. Nationalism is okay for Moscow, but dangerous when occurring in a neighboring country—especially when it is a former Soviet Republic.

The site of the new museum, an abandoned Soviet military

airstrip outside of Tartu, also has symbolic meaning. That the winning design used the airstrip to draw attention to the departure of the Russians could hardly sit well with their neighbor to the east. It was a strong statement of Estonian identity with cultural ties to the west dating back centuries as members of the Hanseatic League.

As **Aaron Betsky** noted in his article for the Fall Issue of *COMPETITIONS* magazine in 2007, commenting on the role of "architecture as a powerful tool in the service of the state...architecture can use place above all else for meaning."

(For the full article and all of the premiated entries, <http://competitions.org/2017/04/estonian-national-museum-competition-2006/>)

In this competition, the winners, DGT, fully understood the site, its implications, and the challenges it presented. At first glance, their visually simple solution could be interpreted as less about architectural symbolism, than providing a flexible, sleek container as a solution to the program. But by integrating the structure so symbolically with the runway, the mes-

sage could only be: That element of history is behind us forever and has been supplanted by a connection to our finno-ugric past, building on that for a better future—as represented by a modern structure.

As reported in Betsky's article, DGT's design was pretty controversial; not only was it a split decision by the jury, Dutch juror **Winy Maas** (MVRDV) had to return to Estonia later to offer support for the jury's choice. In the end, the DGT design was implemented, and finally dedicated last year. From our vantage point, this project, though located in what some might consider a 'no-mans-land,' will certainly stand as one of the most remarkable museum projects of the early 21st Century.

More recently, two primary members from that competition have established their own firms:

- **Lina Ghotmeh** at: Lina Ghotmeh — Architecture ([www.linaghotmeh.com](http://www.linaghotmeh.com))
- **Tsuyoshi Tane** at: Atelier Tsuyoshi Tane Architects ([www.at-ta.fr](http://www.at-ta.fr))

### *Winning Entry*

#### **DGT**

**Lina Ghotmeh, Tsuyoshi Tane  
and Dan Dorell**

Paris/London

OPPOSITE PAGE

View to entrance

BELOW

West elevation view





*Winning Entry*

**DGT**

Paris/London

ABOVE

Entry lobby

LEFT

Summer view to entrance

OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE

view from southwest

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW

View from north





*Winning Entry*

**DGT**

Paris/London

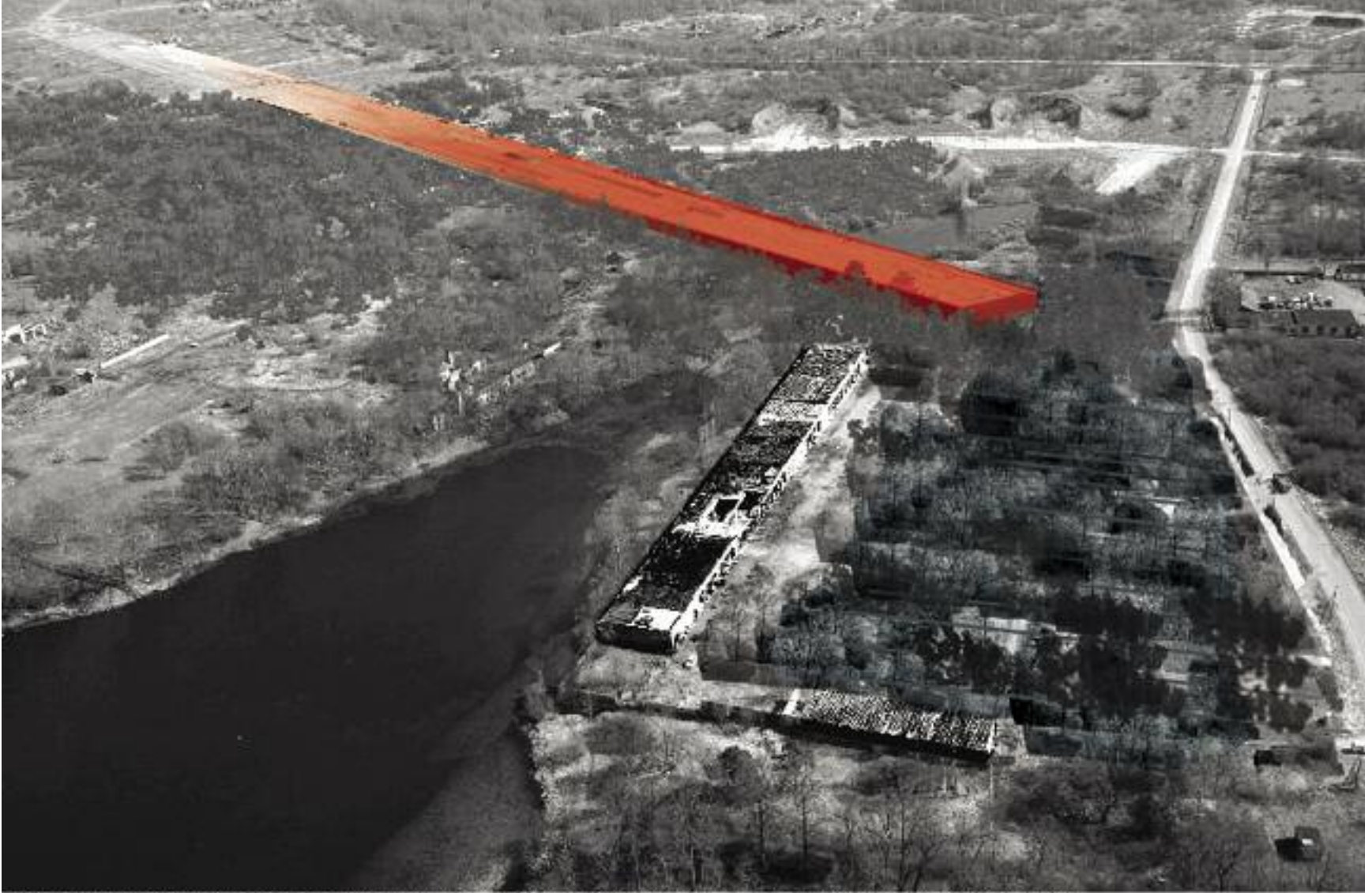
OPPOSITE PAGE

Interior views of exhibit  
and working spaces, street,  
cafe and  
auditorium

RIGHT

View from south to  
entrance (above) and  
facade treatment (below)





Conceptual Axonometric of the ENM Intervention - The New Museum is built upon its own historical context; it appropriates the urban opportunity of the site, the prior airfield platform onto its own roof



*Winning Entry -  
Competition images*

**DGT**

Paris/London

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

Aerial view of site

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Permanent exhibition (left)

Exit view (right)

RIGHT, above

View to entrance and

RIGHT, BELOW

Plan

