

*Floating structure Veetee was created in 2016 during a ten-day summer school titled **5th Season: Wilderness**, organised by Estonian Academy of Arts interior architecture department and led by Sami Rintala, Pavle Stamenovic and b210 Architects. With its biggest wetlands in Estonia and changing water levels, Soomaa was the inspiration for creating a structure that could inhabit different functions: a shelter, a fireplace, a sauna – to meet the needs of a traveller or a local, either by land or by a boat. Floating was conceived as a way to adapt to the ever changing conditions of the Soomaa context, especially the flooding of the 5th season, which happens every year, during two weeks in springtime.*

Q&A with tutors

1. How did you get involved in the summer school? What made it intriguing for you?

Hannes Praks: The Wilderness summer school was born out of the worldwide success of the forest megaphones project. I've personally always liked forest infrastructure, huts and paths etc and I believe these small scale wooden infrastructure projects will continue to be our focus and strength for the near term future. Soomaa is an area with a very specific vibe, for sure. But what makes it really stand out is the spatial change that is born from rainfall, transforming a meadow into a lake in a week. This is unique and this is the feature we went to explore in detail.

Sami Rintala: I was firstly well aware of the first summer school project, having seen the images of the wooden megaphones in the forest. I do not follow very much internet or media about architecture or design, but some few things raise my interest immediately and this was one of them. Secondly, I have a high opinion and experience of Estonian creativity and personality on the making of art and architecture in general.

Pavle Stamenovic: My involvement in the summer school comes from my previous collaboration with Aet Ader and b210 Architects. Aet and I met in EASA (European Architecture Students' Assembly) in Cadiz in 2011, during a Cloud workshop that I was tutoring with two of my colleagues from my University. Since then, we have met around Europe and collaborated on several occasions: most recently, together we tutored Projecting Cinemas Workshop in Tehran beginning of 2016.

Aet Ader: We - b210 Architects - have always liked workshops, masterclasses with an intense dialogue between tutors and students where in a short period of time an idea is developed and the end-result built. During such inspiring summer courses where you step out of your daily hustle and bustle and regular environment for a fixed period, all participants contribute to the result both mentally and physically and a wonderfully collaborative group is born. People learn from each other. And apparently people also become knit together, so whenever they meet elsewhere around the world, it feels like you run into a friend you've known your whole life.

We thought, since the last project we tutored with our architecture office b210 - the forest megaphones - had been an international success, that we should test a similar process in summertime and in a more intensive format – I believe it was Mari Hunt who first told Hannes Praks about the idea.

We've been interested in working with the rich natural environment of Estonia for a while now: how to approach nature infrastructure that offers a hiker or a passerby a new experience. It felt like an excellent challenge, to develop a concept (and also build it) a floating object for the watery environment of Soomaa where the water levels fluctuate. You don't really get such an assignment as an architect during your daily practice. Perhaps we've entered an era where architects and designers have to grasp the potential themselves, set up a challenge, solve it and also build it?

2. What was the process like? How did the group arrive at the Veetee idea?

Aet Ader: The process was extremely fast – just a few days to get to know the location: a hike in the bog during sunrise, a smoke sauna experience by the river, exploring the area in a canoe. All while gazing the pile of beams, as the load of building material was waiting for us in the corner of the yard. After a few functional ideas, each group proceeded already by building a 1:1 scale floating structure using barrels – all of which we then tested together. Of these three nearly 4-metre long and 4-metre wide floating experiments, we chose the most stable one. The charm of testing the structures on a 1:1 scale for designers and architects is that usually we have to develop a project down to every detail first on paper, to be then used for construction procurement. Summer school allowed us to build all the different versions of floats right away and everyone could feel themselves which kind of arrangement for the barrels offers the most stable floating structure. The material we had also set us in a clear direction – if your timber logs are of a certain length, it prescribes the dimensions of the object for you.

There was a strong logic to optimizing the work process. After testing the floats, we spent 6 days building the three parts of the floating project. A team of 5 people worked on each part. Some students got stuck – how is it possible to build without a detailed project: but in such a situation there's no point in endlessly discussing the details, you need to make decisions as you go.

We had told the students to leave laptops home on purpose, which meant that to communicate with others they needed to use visual geometry as you would on a regular building site, drawing possible solutions on scraps of paper or wood. This experience – to be driven by the material – is extremely important and different from the way design usually works, when design comes first and then materials are selected. As tutors, it makes us happy that we followed a natural path to a jointly designed end result. The final object was contributed to by everyone involved, and captures everybody's best ideas.

Hannes Praks: It took the students perhaps a moment to recover from contact with the wilderness. Most of them are urban youth, after all. We went to the sauna a lot, once a day at least, and had discussions around the fire every night. This way, the context, started to seep in. Tutoring architects offered ideas on how to solve nodes and basic problems. Students developed the ideas further. Half of the students were not from the field of architecture, so having to do wood work, as well as build with a team was an entirely fresh format for them. Regardless, they did really well. And what is perhaps most important – I could clearly see them growing attached to each other. I believe learning is a very social process...spending ten days in the forest enabled that.

Pavle Stamenovic: From my point of view as an architect, but also as an educator, I strongly feel that process is crucially important for learning about space and architecture, as well as discovering the most suited architectural solution for particular space-time setting. Furthermore, being in an environment such as Soomaa made our awareness and sensibility towards the context even more sensitive, so that the process was even more focused and intensive; process was fluid, and the ideas and suggestions were organically growing from individual to group. In this sense, I'd say that Veetee is sort of a crowd-based concept.

3. You lead a lot of architecture workshops, what will you remember most about Soomaa?

Sami Rintala: Heh, this is the atmosphere in general, a combination of desolately beautiful forests and marshlands. Positive loneliness shared with a group of people who are willing to investigate life and phenomena. No single detail, not even the dramatics of setting the objects to river, raises over the memory of the houses and the sheltering courtyard that inhabit the meeting of the forest and the slow-going river.

4. Could you put the process / the results in a bit wider, perhaps international context?

Sami Rintala: As an attempt to deal with contemporary challenges, both planetary and local, It is necessary and clever to jump outside the usual game and stratagem of the urban professional life, and seek a counter-phenomena out on the 'edge', where people are ripped off from their roles and positions, and need to act on a common ground. Real needs emerge, and they need to be fulfilled, and meanwhile 'design' becomes just part of 'making'.

In fact, there are so many positive aspects about this type of workshop that they are hard to be listed. But it is perhaps enough to say that while design tries in the bottom create wellbeing, better life (with individual choices what this means) then workshop, designing and building together, preferably cross-disciplinary like now, not only tries to do this, but also does it to the participants during the process already. This well-being of the 'tribe' that works towards a common goal, is both highly meaningful and pure fun.

Aet Ader: Veetee allows people to stay in the Soomaa environment without touching land. It is extremely contextual. Veetee offers something to Soomaa environment that they have not had until now: a public space, a meeting spot on the water. The floating fireplace is a bit like a small village square. My hope is that the canoes drifting along the rivers and flooded areas discover this unexpected resting spot and use it for a break. What could be more beautiful than warm fire over the shimmering surface of the water. The shelter offers cover from rain and a chance to put your feet up for a bit.

Participants who joined the summer school from abroad were charmed by the spaciousness of Soomaa. The expanse you get to experience when standing in the middle of the seemingly endless Kuresoo (in English: *Stork Bog*) can maybe be paralleled only to a desert. It was an experience, working with a group that gives the project their every breath, building an impossible object in natural environment without borders. There's something aboriginal about it. It inspired such powerful emotions that at the end of the 10-day session, we stood at the edge of the bog with tears in our eyes.

Pavle Stamenovic: Nowadays, there is a positive tendency in schools of architecture to focus on learning-by-building approach. I find this a very positive tendency. That way, students experience the reality of their concept: the relational constraints on the line between concept and execution. Also, they are able to feel and understand the material. In relation to this, I would say that Estonian Academy of Arts interior architecture department and Hannes' initiative to organize this kind of design-and-build summer school is very contemporary, and to the point. At the same time, the fact that the summer school lasted for only 10 days (8 working days), with such ambitious results, proves that it was incredibly productive and intense, which I would relate to the incredible context of Soomaa that provided the creative and proactive atmosphere.

Hannes Praks: Wet areas are, recreationally speaking, extremely charming due to the high number of species and unique landscape, but at the same time hard to explore, both in the sense of getting there and staying. VEETEE (in English: *Water Way*), being located in an area that regularly floods and shifts, develops this competency, exploring ways of being both a transport vehicle and a usable space.

5. What broader message might Veetee / Water Way have for architects, travellers, local people etc?

Pavle Stamenovic: Veetee is neither a vessel, nor a house: that is maybe the most intriguing aspect of it: the borderline character of its structure, which is architectural, but complies to the logic of floating. Veetee is open and welcomes anyone who approaches in from water or land. Veetee is open both in function and in design, therefore it can be easily inhabited by those in need of a pause.

Hannes Praks: Forest infrastructure – any building in nature really – does not have to be a saccharine gnome hut. A contemporary form, set apart by contrast, blends into nature so much better than fake history.