

Neighbours act together

Baltic Stories:

A visual guide to spaces of culture
and the people behind them



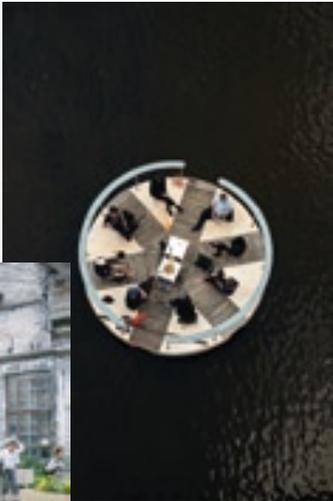
Voronja Gallery · EE

Homo Novus · LV



Engure Sailing School · LV

Uperis · LT



Põhjala Tehas · EE

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Baltic Stories:

Institutions as catalysts for change

A visual guide

Learning and co-creating the city

to spaces of

Building community through sustainability

culture and

Infrastructure connects people

the people

Use of abandoned spaces

behind them

Contemporary culture crosses boundaries

Old traditions — new approaches

EE • LV • LT

Alternative visions and spaces

Urban Institute
Culture Crab

Baltic Stories

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03 M. Rothko Art Centre · 04 Kuldīga Artists' Residence · 05 Nida Art Colony · 06 Centre for Civil Education

07 Architektūros fondas · 08 To the Power of Zero · 09 School of Architecture

10 Clean. Good. Cēsis · 11 Laagna Community Garden · 12 Repair Basement

13 Uperis · 14 Great Public Spaces · 15 Kandava Open-Air Swimming Pool · 16 Engure Sailing School

17 Free Riga · 18 Põhjala Tehas Cultural Factory · 19 Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia

20 Sansusī Wellbeing Residency · 21 Performative Design Association · 22 Homo Novus · 23 Orbita

24 Upīte Centre · 25 The Onion Route · 26 Musteika Ethnocultural Reserve

27 Stencibility Festival · 28 Taškas Art Residence · 29 Voronja Gallery · 30 Palanga Street Radio

Neighbours act together 15

Institutions as catalysts for change 31

Learning and co-creating the city 61

Building community through sustainability 85

Infrastructure connects people 109

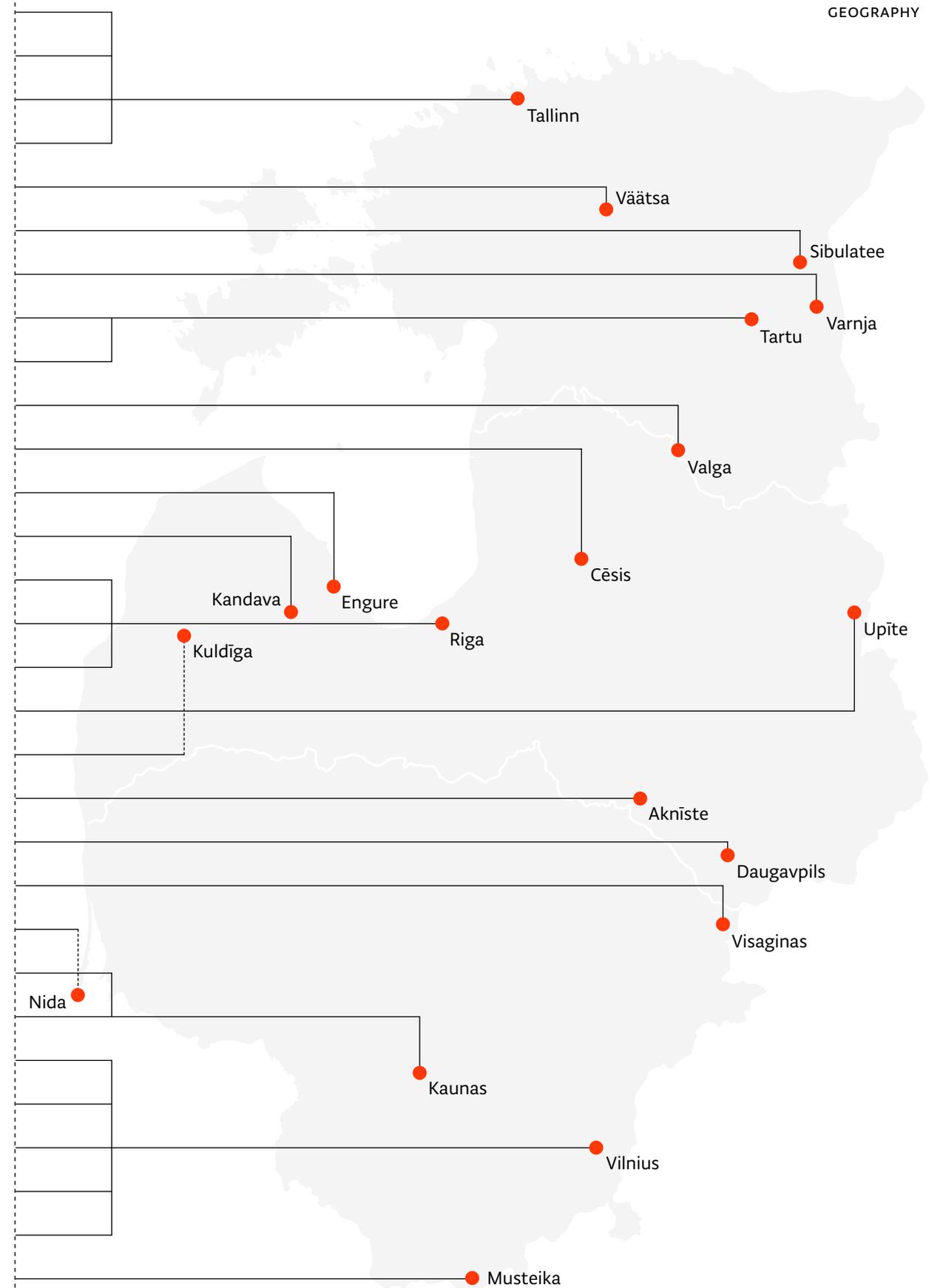
Use of abandoned spaces 139

Contemporary culture crosses boundaries 163

Old traditions — new approaches 189

Alternative visions and spaces 209

09 School of Architecture	76
11 Laagna Community Garden	94
18 Põhjala Tehas	146
19 Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM)	154
02 Väätsa Apartment Building Festival	24
25 The Onion Route	194
29 Voronja Gallery	222
12 Repair Basement	100
27 Stencibility Festival	210
14 Great Public Spaces	116
10 Clean. Good. Cēsis	86
16 Engure Sailing School	130
15 Kandava Open-Air Swimming Pool	122
17 Free Riga	140
22 Homo Novus	176
23 Orbita	184
24 Upīte Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage	190
04 Kuldīga Artists' Residence	40
20 Sansusī Wellbeing Residency	164
03 Mark Rothko Art Centre	32
28 Taškas Art Residence	216
05 Nida Art Colony	46
01 Kiemo Gallery	16
21 Performative Design Association	170
05 Centre for Civil Education	54
07 Architektūros fondas	62
08 To the Power of Zero	68
13 Uperis	110
30 Palanga Street Radio	230
26 Musteika Ethnocultural Reserve	200



Baltic Stories: Culture. Place. People

8

In the form of a visual guidebook, *Baltic Stories* features 30 stories from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, exploring the relationship between culture, place and people. The publication demonstrates the diversity of cultural processes and the impact they can bring to place development, and vice versa — how space shapes cultural processes.

INTRODUCTION

9

To most of the world there is still a sense of mystery to the Baltic states. Many only know them as tiny countries in the periphery of Europe, although the land area of each country actually exceeds that of the Netherlands and Belgium. Someone mistaking Latvia for Lithuania, or more extravagantly, the Baltics for the Balkans still does not come as a surprise. Even the inhabitants of each of these countries tend to know surprisingly little about each other, and for most people, the stories in this book will provide a fresh look at their neighbours — a growing community radio started by friends, a street art festival changing the perception of public space, or decaying Soviet heritage that still serves as a meeting point for locals. From an anthropological perspective, only by a close-up look at people in their lived environments can we begin to know more and understand a place. This is what *Baltic Stories* sets out to do — map out and reveal small-scale, everyday and unexpected stories with the power to shift sedimented narratives and practices and help understand the region better. ¶ Three key dimensions shaped the list — people, space and cultural approaches. We have included bottom-up initiatives driven by individuals and small communities, as well as top-down maneuvers by state and private organisations, looked at physical spaces of new development and historical heritage in urban and rural contexts, and also less tangible forms, like the process-oriented work of the Performative Design Association. Overall, we explore different approaches and understandings of what culture can be and what it can do — from arts to everyday community activities, sports, sustainable living and more. The overarching question that links all the initiatives together is — what works? How can people turn unrecognised spaces into meaningful places that others begin to care for and want to engage with? What role can culture play in building a sense of community and even improving the quality of life? ¶ We intend for the stories to reach three main audiences — policymakers, cultural tourists and the general public. We are targeting policymakers to shed light on less recognised cultural practices and spaces and their wide-reaching effects, which should not be overlooked in planning or implementation processes. At the same time we see *Baltic Stories* as a guide to better understanding and finding unique places to visit in the region. And finally, we hope the stories serve as an example and inspiration to individuals, showcasing the benefits of becoming involved in community, placemaking and activism in a wide array of chosen fields. ¶ The book is split into nine chapters, each contributing to recent phenomena that have invigorated the relationship between places and people. Instead of serving as a strict classification, the chapters emphasise the diverse nature and concerns of the initiatives. Of course, many of them actually straddle a number of these themes in their

everyday activities and aims. The first chapter “Neighbours act together” shows the power local communities can have and the drive of change that can start from just one person willing to improve life in their surroundings. The second chapter “Institutions as catalysts for change” addresses top-down approaches which contribute to the local environment and communities. “Learning and co-creating the city” features attempts by professional architects to construct new approaches to education and acting together in the built environment. The fourth chapter “Building community through sustainability” zooms in on environmental challenges and local initiatives that not only propose healthy alternatives for the planet, but also strengthen local communities in the process. The fifth chapter “Infrastructure connects people” shows how building physical links can also improve social connection. Chapter six “Use of abandoned spaces” showcases recent efforts bringing new energy to post-industrial heritage and abandoned spaces, illustrating uses that go beyond gentrification. Chapter seven “Contemporary culture crosses boundaries” turns to contemporary culture and art developing creative tools to question our routinised behaviors and the potential to change them. Chapter eight “Old traditions — new approaches” looks at places and practices of historical value that have been collectively reinvented for a contemporary context. And finally, chapter nine “Alternative visions and spaces” brings forth a series of refreshingly idiosyncratic and niche approaches. ¶ This publication is a result of collaboration between six urban, community, research, art and culture organisations from Latvia (Urban Institute, Culture Crab), Lithuania (Laboratory of Critical Urbanism, Performative Design Association) and Estonia (Linnalabor, Lasnaidee) with support and advice stemming from across all sectors from all three states. Moreover, six Baltic photographers with close links to the cultural sector became co-authors of the project, creating a visual documentation of the people and spaces. All the interviews with the people behind the initiatives took place in the summer of 2020 during a short but welcome respite from the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was possible to travel and meet within a “Baltic bubble”.

The Baltic region The Baltic states are located by the Baltic Sea on the northeastern edge of Europe. While there are important historical and cultural differences between the three states, the micro-region has also had a shared trajectory, especially after the emergence of independent states post-World War I. Some of the topics we touch upon are the shared Soviet past and its legacy, visible both in the built environment and in social relationships — a certain lack of civic engagement and trust, and division across ethnic lines. More recently, the course of globalisation has resulted in in-

creased outmigration, leaving many regions depopulated and empty — an issue that several of this publication’s initiatives address. Accession to the EU has been a driving force behind vast development projects — societal and infrastructural. While this has accelerated economic development, with the Baltic states becoming champions among the newcomers, accession has also resulted in struggles to preserve existing, locally specific practices. Through examples of how people young and old interpret local and historical heritage and build new forms of culture, Baltic Stories seeks to uncover the compound perspectives on life in the region, recognising a diversity of sentiments and views. ¶ Baltic Stories is an attempt to tap into the complexities of the local environment, various initiatives and world views that are often missed by generalised statements, statistical data and blue-sky travel guides. We have intentionally looked beyond capitals and city centres to tell stories from different geographical and social corners of the Baltic states. Cultural practices are carriers of deep meaning that can help us understand ourselves, society and the times we’re living in. This compilation of personal and visual stories presents a snapshot or cross-section of this region and its people, giving an insight into what Baltic means today and how the cultural ecology of the region functions.

Looking at diverse cultural practices Can neighbours looking after their courtyard be considered a cultural activity? What about street art, growing vegetables in a community garden, or even a suburban ferry or a local sailing school? As cultural policies become more focussed on strengthening civic engagement, what activities can and should be viewed as culture? ¶ Culture is increasingly being recognised as a tool, both as a source of creative industries and, more recently, as a response for strengthening local communities. Various funding institutions require artists and creatives to include a social dimension to their work, and city planners and policymakers are also turning to cultural practices, recognising them as a key resource in creating sustainable cities. This calls for a deep reflection and understanding of the real cultural phenomena “on the ground” — the local resources, relationships, treasures and qualities that may or may not match current agendas and structures of power. ¶ Baltic Stories focusses on cultural practices set in real time and place, emphasising a diversity of approaches and activities that also serve a social purpose and have become part of the fabric of local communities. Taking into account both a growing apathy and disengagement with political processes, and an increasing polarisation among social groups (the so-called “culture wars”), we single out and recognise cultural initiatives that bring people together, creating unexpected and often overlooked patterns and

bonds. In some cases, this means stretching the boundaries of what may traditionally be considered culture — for example, urban gardens as a meeting point in Tallinn's most populous neighbourhood, and sports and leisure as a source of community at Kandava swimming pool and Engure yacht club in Western Latvia. ¶ Highlighting organisations dealing with everything from contemporary art to traditional folklore; from tourism to architecture and sustainability, we make an intentional choice to view culture through the broadest lens, appreciating the significance of everyday routines and the meaning they produce and carry. Practices grounded in a historically developed time and place are the focal point of Baltic Stories. In a world accelerated by capitalism and technology, cultural practices are also subjected to a monetised logic and value system, prioritising efficiency, speed and financial gain. Indeed, financial sustainability is a common and necessary preoccupation among many of the people we interviewed. However, we also recognise a need to emphasise values and behaviours that subvert this narrative and demonstrate other motivations and outcomes: localised activities big and small that empower citizens, provide alternatives to consumerism, prioritise togetherness and build bridges across divides.

People, place and collaboration The stories in this book are based on the real experiences of people behind cultural initiatives that take a range of forms — informal, non-profits, cultural organisations, public-private partnerships, municipal activities and state institutions. Each story draws upon interviews with individuals involved in the day-to-day activities of each initiative, covering their personal trajectories and motivation, strategies, challenges and observations. The result is a collection of fascinating personal narratives, as well as an experience-based resource for anyone involved in this sector or dreaming of an initiative of their own, and professionals planning to work with them (including city planners and policymakers). ¶ While the stories aim to inspire others in the Baltics and beyond to become more involved within their local community, they also reveal various complicated themes and challenges. Building meaningful projects is undoubtedly a long-term prospect, and while a team's enthusiasm is crucial, it may experience natural ebbs and flows. Mainly operating outside a traditional business model, financial stability and sustainability is often a key consideration for those interviewed. Some choose to work other jobs, some invent ways to make their cultural initiatives sustainable, yet others are involved in partnerships with the private sector, and most in some way navigate the world of state, European or international funding opportunities. This can involve compromise or at least a clear understanding of and ability to work within the frameworks and agendas set by vari-

ous actors. ¶ Often, there is also an element of calculated risk and the conscious acceptance of a certain precarity — keys to more flexibility and creative freedom. This can involve a step away from more traditional or stable career choices, like the Slišāns family, who left jobs in the capital city to return to their rural hometown of Upīte. Other challenges mentioned range from strictly practical everyday concerns to maintaining discipline within non-hierarchical organisational structures, engaging sometimes reserved target audiences, and the shifting nature of relationships with local and state governments. As the interviews took place in 2020, for many the Covid-19 pandemic increased an already existing unpredictability, with unexpected financial, logistical and regulatory changes calling for even more creative solutions than usual. The results of this upheaval will no doubt reverberate for years to come, in the cultural sector as in all others. ¶ In all cases, a key factor seems to be a willingness to work together with others, at times in unexpected ways. The diverse and sometimes innovative examples of collaboration highlighted include cultural initiatives working with each other, with municipalities, neighbours, individuals and private enterprise. Since all the selected initiatives are in some sense participatory and community-based, target audiences also often become collaborators — whether these are local residents building boxes in a community garden, elderly neighbours co-creating artworks at the Voronja or Kiemo galleries, or young people in a correctional institution in northern Latvia becoming actors in a Homo Novus festival performance. These colourful stories form a catalogue of shared and meaningful placemaking practices stretching across the Baltic region and forming connections beyond it.

Enjoy the journey!

Team

236

Why are participatory and community activities important in the development of a place?

Liana Ivete Benke is a co-founder of Culture Crab, board member of the ISSP contemporary photography platform, and freelance researcher, writer and educator in visual culture and anthropology. ¶ "Becoming involved in local community activities can provide a sense of ownership and simple pleasure in the surrounding environment and everyday life. The more people participate and care, the richer a place becomes."



Anete Ušča is a board member of Urban Institute, co-founder of Culture Crab and PhD candidate at the European University Institute. She is interested in culture, people, politics and cities. ¶ "The active involvement of diverse members of society is important because it allows us to recognise the complexity of the environment we live in. To develop places that people feel they belong to and want to take care of."



Dovilė Gaižauskienė is a designer and founder of the Performative Design Association. She works across various design and arts projects mostly aimed at social change. ¶ "Participatory activities are important to the development because of the multiple perspectives and the possibility to uncover more content; a feeling of ownership for those who could potentially become active users of the place; spreading knowledge, different narratives about the space in a broader context."



AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

237

Siarhei Liubimau is an associate professor and co-founder of the Laboratory of Critical Urbanism at the European Humanities University — a Belarusian university in Vilnius, Lithuania. ¶ "Participation is crucial because knowledge about a place is richer when it is contested; and a place is firmer if intentionally made for different others."



Maria Derlōš works both with NGOs and the city administration, handling the development of urban gardening in Tallinn, promoting urban education and citizen participation in urban planning, and fostering inclusive city development. ¶ "Different levels and expressions of community activities empower us to take steps towards a more diverse and enjoyable living environment. Even if we are more passive observers than initiators, it contributes to our sense of belonging to society."



Polina Ljaševa is a project manager at the NGO Lasnaidee. She also handles Russian language communication with the media for various organisations. ¶ "An active community makes it possible to translate into action such concepts and projects that local authorities or the state are usually not involved in. It allows you to do small but necessary things for the community. It is also an important part of self-realisation and an opportunity to feel important and involved in changes."



What was the most interesting and inspiring place or moment during your experience of photographing the project?

Monika Jagusinskytė is a photographer and art director whose work revolves around the themes of the body, intimacy and fashion. ❖ "I greatly enjoyed every place I went to but Musteika was a surprise as I'd never heard of the village before. We were met with warmth and sent home with a bag full of apples. It was a wonderful day of simple pleasures."



Romanas Naryškin is a freelance copywriter with a camera, exploring solitude, silence, consciousness and human vulnerability through environmental documentary portraits of self and others. ❖ "All of the assigned projects were immensely illuminating and adventurous. Perhaps visiting Kiemo Gallery in Kaunas and the youth centre Taškas in Visaginas were the most intense experiences that regularly come back to me, and I intend to visit them again."



Kristīne Madjare is a photographer, living and working in Riga. She works with documentary photography projects, focusses on introverted communities and complicated life stories. In addition works as a freelance photographer, taking on mostly fashion and editorial assignments. ❖ "The most inspiring place was the swimming pool in Kandava. I was amazed by its architecture, sculptures and history and I hope to come back one hot summer's day and try to jump from the highest diving platform."



Andrejs Strokins works with documentary photography projects as well as vernacular images and found archives. In addition to pursuing his personal projects, Andrejs is a freelance photographer, taking on mostly reportage, portraiture and editorial assignments. ❖ "I experienced the most interesting and inspiring moments during the Homo Novus festival."



Patrik Tamm is a freelance photographer based in Tallinn. As a photographer he tends to be subtle. For him, the most enjoyable images result from patience combined with observance. ❖ "Throughout the project I was continuously delighted by being surrounded with heartwarming people. I went to places I was unaware of, even being local myself. The most inspiring and uniting factor was the genuine enthusiasm of the people themselves, no matter the different cultural backgrounds."



Kiur Kaasik is a documentary photographer, currently working for the media company Ekspress Meedia. Previously, he mainly worked with local cultural projects and enterprises like Tartu2024 European Capital of Culture, Stencibility and Voronja Gallery. ❖ "All the places that I visited left an impression on me, but if I had to highlight one initiative, it would be Arhitektuurikool. If only I'd have had the chance to attend such an educational and interesting hobby school when I was a child..."



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Baltic Stories — an alternative visual guidebook — explores the relationship between culture, place and people in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This journey through the Baltic states delves into the small-scale, everyday and unexpected — a street art festival in Tartu changing the perception of public space, a Vilnius community radio started by friends, urban gardens, cutting edge contemporary art spaces, decaying Soviet heritage that still serves as a meeting point for locals, and more. 30 inspiring stories with original photography by up-and-coming photographers uncover the diversity of local culture and its wide-reaching effects, while examining what Baltic means today. For independent cultural tourists, policymakers, and anyone else willing to explore and take part in shared and meaningful placemaking practices.

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