



Dear Friend vol 17, August 2020, Written by Maria Juur, Image of a selection of Kastner-Kahn houses and the town synagogue (center row, first image on the right) in Roosevelt, NJ, by Maria Juur, Designed by Ott Kagovere, Edited by Rachel Kinbar, Concept by Sandra Nuut & Ott Kagovere, Title font Cap Sazun by Eva Rank, Text font Ladna Sans by Andree Paat (Kirjatehnika), Published by Estonian Academy of Arts, Department of Graphic Design, Thanks to Indrek Sirkel and Pärtel Balmere. Previous issues at [gd.artun.ee/dearfriend](http://gd.artun.ee/dearfriend)



I hope you are staying safe and well.

I am writing these lines from my self-imposed corona-exile in central New Jersey, from a town called Roosevelt (population: 800).

Nick and I decided to leave Los Angeles and drive 3000 miles (5000 km) cross-country to spend the summer at his family's cabin in Woodstock, New York—yes, *that* Woodstock—but this week we are house-sitting at his parents' place in rural New Jersey. This week, on August 20th, I also celebrated the Estonian Restoration of Independence Day. It's crazy to me how much New Jersey looks like Estonia (there's even an Estonian house 20 minutes away and former Estonian President T.H. Ilves grew up not far from here), and yet I feel farther from home than ever—mostly due to COVID and the fact that August 20th also marks my 10-year anniversary as an *émigré*, an immigrant by choice.

When I first started dating Nick, he tried explaining to me where he was from. It's not that I wasn't interested, but I've been to my fair share of American small towns, and when he mentioned that his place of birth was only one hour from both New York City and Philadelphia, I remember feeling a bit disappointed that he wasn't from NYC proper, because that would have meant I'd always have a place to stay in the Big Apple. Little did I know that I was actually about to discover one of my favorite places in the U.S., a town that also has an interesting connection to Estonia.

So when Sandra, an old friend from college, asked me put on my art critic hat once again, it quickly dawned on me that I should write about Roosevelt, NJ. Roosevelt (a.k.a. Jersey Homesteads) was created as part of President F.D. Roosevelt's New Deal program to break out of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Nearby Princeton, NJ, resident and university professor Albert Einstein—yes, *that* Einstein—gave the town his political and moral support. Established in 1937, Roosevelt was like an American *kibbutz* for Jewish garment workers, the country's first and only secular Jewish commune funded by U.S. government. [A *kibbutz* is a collective community in Israel that was traditionally based on agriculture. The Israeli *kibbutz* has long been regarded as a successful utopian experiment in communal living.]

Once the plan for Roosevelt was approved, the German-born architect Alfred Kastner was hired to design a factory, a community building, and a few hundred houses. He, in turn, reached out to the Estonian-born architect Louis Kahn and hired him as his principal assistant. Somehow, I left Estonia, moved to the States, and ended up marrying a guy who grew up in a house designed by an Estonian architect. *What are the odds?!*

Needless to say, Estonians are obsessed with Louis Kahn and his connection to Saaremaa. I am, too. I mean, the guy's a genius. When I look at pictures of Kahn's National Assembly building in Bangladesh, I want to gasp for air and cry. Our lives are just blips in eternity, but concrete monuments like this are forever. Or they should be, at least. I've visited a handful of Kahn buildings in the U.S. and it always feels

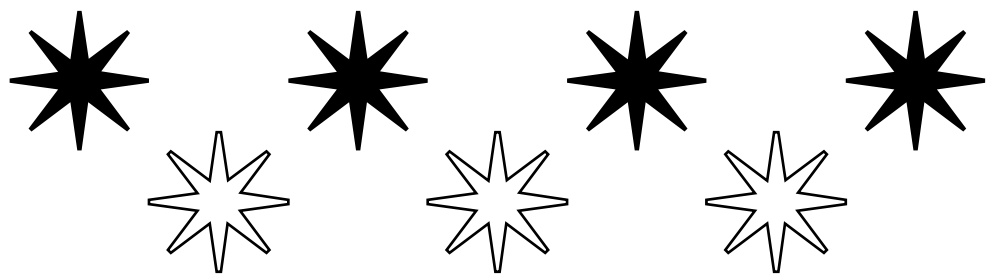
special—even when lurking and loitering around the Salk Institute in San Diego on a day when it's closed to the public, with my architecture-fanatic mom who was visiting from Estonia.

Kahn worked on Roosevelt at the very beginning of his career when he was strongly influenced by Bauhaus and Le Corbusier. As a result, Roosevelt's homes look like LEGO-houses: they are cinder block rectangles, originally painted white, with flat roofs. They are attached and detached, mostly one story. All the original houses in the town looked alike.

It's so funny and interesting to me how what we value in architecture changes over time. When Roosevelt was created, it marked a moment of hope and renewal amidst a financial and societal crisis, carried by Modernist and utopian ideas. It marked a return to nature from cities (Roosevelt is surrounded by a wildlife conservation area), and a return to safety for the Jewish community. To this day, Roosevelt only has a borough hall, a school, a post office, and a synagogue; the town has no stores. But Roosevelt is no longer a strictly Jewish hub, and you'll have to put in some work to spot an original, unaltered Kahn building on your drive through the town in 2020.

Nick explained to me how when he was a teen, his life was made hell by his parents' project that entailed adding a second story to their original Kahn house. The construction, chaos, and noise went on and on—and his house was not the only one getting a makeover. Many of the original Kahn houses now sport all types of add-ons and features that are a far cry from what we would term "Bauhaus." For me, an Estonian with an Art History degree and reverence for Kahn, this is pure blasphemy. A *butchering* of Bauhaus. Suburbanites' attack on architecture with a capital "A." But the good people of Roosevelt just needed more storage or another bedroom. Roosevelt houses are notorious for not having basements or attics, and so I cannot really blame families who needed more space for taking matters into their own hands.

I love Roosevelt. I love the homes, the history, and the nature. The crickets here at night are so loud I cannot even hear my own thoughts. I forgot to mention that my husband's mom is the mayor of the town, which technically makes me the Crown Princess of Roosevelt, NJ. I hereby extend an invite to you to come visit this very special place. Wishing you a great end-of-summer until we meet again.



HUGS,  
MARIA JUUR