Visiting and looking at contemporary exclusive streets in the European capitals, the foremost impression is of long-standing prosperity but also of elusiveness. Viewing the pedestrians and shoppers, one is also struck by an impression of wealth and stability, of outstanding well-being. At the same time, the history of the streets seems to be founded more on reputation than on what is articulated in their appearance, which is often a very polished long facade of high-rise buildings of different eras. This has to do with the apparent restoration that they frequently undergo. I am looking for what is behind such scenes of apparent prosperity and possible historical oblivion, taking two streets in two cities by the Gulf of Finland as examples. Do streets have a long history of their own, and can it be captured and given expression both in “practice-describing sequences” and in outlines of disruptions according to the overall history of the cities? And from the point of view of today, how can this interesting phase of late modernity be understood, when it seems that the most central streets in the capitals resemble each other more and more and thus seem to refute or neglect their history? My examples are the Northern Esplanade in Helsinki and Bolshaya Konyushennaya in St Petersburg.

In looking behind these scenes, one could rely on the theories of urban development (Sennett 1992, 2006; Stevenson 2003), of zone building in the globalizing city (Zukin 1995), but even more so on theories about history and amnesia in the modern city (Crinson 2005; Zukin 2011; Boyer 2001). Such streets are regularly to be found in the central parts of the cities and at some distance from streets of lesser reputation. The late modern look can be seen as a result of new stages in the culture of consumption, that of the experience economy, where not only distinguished commodities, but also the appearance of the buying rooms, the stores, and even the social roles in the purchase situation are at stake (Löfgren 2005; Zukin 1995, 2011; Sjöholm 2014). In this article, however, I will choose to search for former stages in the consumption patterns which certainly are one aspect of their history.

For a street to be distinguished and different meant, and still means, taking the challenges of differentiation into its strategy. Staying exclusive poses a challenge to those who “maintain” the streets, to find a balance between resistance to change and resilience in adopting new patterns of street life. Sometimes it also requires a certain and timely flexibility. This project involves – at different historical times – many actors, real estate owners, city planners, shopkeepers, and last but not least audiences, pedestrians and consumers. But in the background there are always organizational strategies that are to be found in both the public and the private sector. Behind the facades actors are working and the streets send out their messages in accordance with the actors’ intentions.

In this article I will try to outline the history of the two streets and their street life with the Lefebvrian notion of representational spaces as an underlying viewpoint: the streets seen through their associated images and symbols, that spring from the activities, as the spaces of inhabitants and users that these activi-
ties and commodities are directed to, and in some rare cases dealt with by witnesses to those streets, as memories that have been given written form (Åström, Olsson & Kivistö 1999). In Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space, its three dimensions are crucial: spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces (Lefebvre 1974/1998). The spatial practices are what make the streets living and active places, the representations of the streets are the plans behind them and their fulfilment. The last dimension seeks to embody the experience of space; as this dimension is individual, we can here only look for what is being offered to experience. Streets are routes, but also places in themselves, and the urban dweller passes into and out of these realities with a very distinct knowledge of what to find where.

The method of the article is based on the assumption that the offers of the streets can be seen to be the most important factors that determine their appearance and atmosphere. Thus, the supplies and offers of shops, cultural establishments, lodging houses and hotels, eating-out establishments and cafeterias which are important for attracting customers and shoppers to the streets, are the keys to their appearances. Together they create an ever-changing urban assemblage that makes the streets and their buildings come alive. This assemblage can be captured through historical and contemporary overviews of the sets of shops and establishments. But the historical flow of such establishments is not what I am looking for. On the contrary, it is the overall picture at some important times or in some periods that hopefully will expose the urban composition I am after. Both “Stills” and “Long-term periods” will then be considered, in comparison and in a succession from about 1880 to 2010, although the founding of the streets will also be presented. With this method I am looking for prosperous periods and stagnation, but also what lies behind them, that is, what (economic and political) system and ideology they are an expression of. What mixture of resistance and resilience do the streets show in different periods? Do certain very flexible eras stand out?

For the last stage or period that I am interested in, the late modern phase, I suggest that two concepts might additionally be of special help. They are flexism and pastiche, the former alluding to a phenomenon characteristic of “the postmodern urban condition”, a heightened form of flexibility, and the latter to certain traits in the look of the streets (Dear & Flusty 1999:75).

**Why the Esplanade and Bolshaya Konyushennaya?**

As one method in this article I intend to use my own participant observations as a kind of auto-ethnography. My reminiscences of the Northern Esplanade in Helsinki, which is my home town, date back to the early 1960s, and my visits to St Petersburg have included observations of Bolshaya Konyushennaya in 1986, 2003, 2006 and the summers of 2010 and 2012. My interest in the two streets has personal experiences as an outset.¹ In 1986 I was shown a department store at Bolshaya Konyushennaya by a Russian urban ethnologist colleague, who was eager to show me this urban phenomenon. Ac-
customed to the luxurious western department stores such as Kaufhaus des Westens in Berlin and Stockmann in Helsinki, I was surprised by the extremely mundane appearance and interior of this building, but also impressed by its construction. I wondered about the history of the department store. On the other hand I was at the same time also aware of the periodic recession of the Northern Esplanade of the 1980s, although the Stockmann department store was still flourishing. Remembering the Esplanade’s deep urban hectic life at one of its end in the 1960s, something was clearly missing in the 1980s. And, as a sudden blooming, two rather luxurious continental cafeterias sprang up at the same time on the Esplanade in the spring of 1990 and since then the street has reclaimed its former glory. In 2003 when visiting and staying in a hotel on Bolshaya Konyushennaya I experienced the same, the street blooming. What was it that suddenly made streets come alive?

In streets dedicated to consumption, and thus not so easily perceived spaces, the consumption patterns differ according to what is on sale, in which framework and who the consumers are. Consumption can be seen as a dimension of both public and private life and even of leisure. But streets can in some way also include not only consumption but innovations, wider international contacts, connections to activities taking place at completely different localities. Thus the tension between the owning of properties, the activities going on in the properties and the level of local or international decision-making also needs to be addressed at least with some words. My suggestion, which I will dwell on further when we come to the part on the “postmodern urban condition”, is that we need some new ways of looking at such affluent streets that I will discuss. City life and urbanism take up new traits, which customers, consumers and other actors react to and by their participation are involved in shaping. The long modernist era of the twentieth century focused on complicated relations between the centre and the periphery of the cities that have been dealt with also in Scandinavian ethnology (Ristilammi 2003). At one point the centre lost its attractiveness, but it has also been noted that the extension of the most active areas of the city centres have seriously decreased lately, so that most consumption activities take place in a very limited space. Both the Northern Esplanade of Helsinki and Bolshaya Konyushennaya are situated in areas that are at the same time hectic and village-like today. They are also “historical” streets in the sense that they have a long and fascinating history.

The patterns of late modernity with its deliberate and often banal search for history, and at the same time its fascination with the surface and the superficial, lead to different forms and new kinds of urban spaces. Of course our two streets are the same as before – most of their buildings have been preserved and are still the same as a hundred years ago. But in what sense can we talk of continuity and in what can we gain something from perceiving them as “urban tableaus” (Boyer 2001)? Do the histories of the streets, of The Esplanade and of the Bolshaya Konyushennaya, have any meaning today, except for the art historian, the home-town urbanite, the tourist and the ethnologist? What do long-term
structures on the one hand, and the sudden and rapid changes on the other, mean in their history? What differences do they show in their history? What does it mean that they are once again prosperous streets and can we find an answer to the riddle of their new appearances in the postmodern urban condition?

Capturing the Commercial Life – the Method and Sources of the Article

In analysing the history of streets we need some kind of documentation. Historical first-hand sources are of course to be found, but extremely time-consuming to collect. Concerning the two streets in focus, we are lucky to be able to use printed “street histories” that are based on official documents and narratives. What seems to be the case for such street histories is that they resemble the ways pedestrians look at streets, as a string of shops, the gaze focusing on each at a time. The method of the article will be to catch such sets of shops/establishments from both written sources and my own auto-ethnographical observations of the two streets. In reading the historical overviews I replace my picture of the streets – also from different times – with the historically outlined one and try to characterize the periods mentioned above. The fact that the places are the same and still not the same is what makes the historic dynamic of streets interesting. The object of one’s gaze changes with time, but with the help of reconstructions from bygone periods this gaze of one’s own is replaced by other pictures and fertilized by their historical depth, hopefully also for the readers. The obvious fact that all streets have histories will be revealed through historical details that help to investigate and uncover different epochs and their underlying activity and economic strategies. The analyses seek to find turning points as well as deep structures.

As an answer to an interest in urban history and one’s hometown, new historical publications have begun to appear. Bolshaya Konyushennaya, together with fifteen other streets in St Petersburg, has since the beginning of the 2000s had cultural-historical reviews in the form of small books. A book called Ulitsa Bolshaya Konyushennaya appeared in 2003 with a structure describing the street proceeding from its houses or properties, the history of which is then recorded as to their owners, inhabitants and economic establishments (Kirikov 2003). A keen interest in the families, famous personages and firms and shops that the houses provided space for, means that one is able to reconstruct the different stages the streets have undergone through this property evidence. The book is illustrated with fine photographs of the street and seems to be an answer to what the native flaneur is searching for, namely a history behind the facades that seeks the traces directly in different buildings and ultimately their different uses (Crinson 2005:xvii; Tester 1994). Accidentally the little book also shows an interest in the innovations and novelties of the twentieth century, thus picturing the modernist turns, which makes it very suitable for my purposes.2

Similar books describing the properties of different blocks have been very popular in Helsinki ever since 1976 when the first, called From the Buffalo to the Bullfinch, referring to the animal names
of the different blocks in Southern Helsinki, was published (Ollila & Toppari 1976). This first book also comprises the history of the buildings on the Northern Esplanade by its blocks the Dromedary, the Unicorn, the Gnu and the Gazelle. Since then four similar books (1977–1997) on other Helsinki blocks and districts have appeared. The texts in From the Buffalo to the Bullfinch take us to different decades in the history of the street in an unchronological way and focusing on details that are thought to be interesting. The topics are the same as in Kirikov’s book: the owners, the people living in the properties and the shops they have housed. These books will be my primary sources. I use them in distilling the commercial side out of them, thus bringing out the symbols and the signs characterizing the streets in different eras.

Urban city remembrances of different parts of the city have been collected and also published (Åström, Olsson, Kivistö 1999). Finally, I use my own observations of the Esplanade from different periods; in the 1990s and 2000s with written notes. During my three visits to St Petersburg in the first decade of the 2000s Bolshaya Konyushennaya has been observed with a similar focus on its offers, also recorded in notebooks. When references are not cited, the observations are mine.

Before coming to this late phase of the histories of the streets, however, their origins will be rehearsed and some periods looked at in more depth. I have chosen four periods: I The original settings or the roots of the streets; II The turn of the century 1900; III The divergent paths in the long period 1917–1990, characterized by national modernity and/or Soviet socialism; and IV The upheaval process since 1990. The first two periods will give the coordinates of the streets and focus on the early commercial and multicultural settings, the third will illustrate continuity and a slow break through consumerism as an aspect of modernism and the last a fragmentation of the city space, with focuses on consumption for a special audience as a leading trait.

I. The Roots of the Streets

Both St Petersburg and Helsinki were in their outset constructed according to imperial plans. Their architecture does not easily lend itself to any romantic upheaval because of the strict neoclassical style that characterizes or dominates the periods. Helsinki was founded in 1550 and moved to its present location in 1640. In 1812 when it was declared the capital of the Russian Grand Duchy of Finland that had come into being as a result of the war of 1808–1809, it was a small town, compared to its Russian counterpart St Petersburg. The latter was founded in 1703 and had then a hundred-year lead in urban development over Helsinki. Helsinki was to have two periods of intensive central building activity, right after 1812 until 1850 with a light, mostly empire look in its central parts, and the late nineteenth century, when the town was industrialized. St Petersburg with its impressive Nevsky Prosp ekt and numerous buildings from the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, also faced a turbulent time at the end of the century, with similar industrial activity to its small cousin.

The Esplanade in Helsinki was constructed as an impressive park and boulevard between two streets, with two rows
of trees in the park in the middle according to plans of 1826. It was supposed to connect the old city of the late eighteenth century, comprising the power centre, with new parts being built at the time. Fifty years later a great change set in. Its northern street was rebuilt in the 1870s to the 1890s, when a new layer of impressive stone houses in neo-Renaissance style was erected. Soon it became the number one commercial street in Helsinki. As there were the most elegant hotels and restaurants of the city, the Esplanade also became famous as a promenade, where the flaneurs and artists of the turn of the century roamed the street. This street was to get the first great department store in Finland.

Bolshaya Konyushennaya, this side street of Nevsky Prospekt, for its part, was constructed in the 1730s and 1740s near the heart of the power centre of St Petersburg, the Winter Palace, but also deliberately as the centre for foreign congregations. Thus it came to embrace the Lutheran churches of that day, the Finnish and Swedish churches (on Malaya Konyushennaya) being amongst them. Another common trait of the Esplanade and its history of the 1880s and 1890s was that Bolshaya Konyushennaya also underwent a similar sudden change, a building process at the same time: five-storey high stone houses were erected, giving the street an impressive neo-Renaissance and national romantic appearance. Bolshaya Konyushennaya did not enclose any park, but it was also later to get a small boulevard of trees in the middle. After its hectic building period it would also house a department store. It looks as if the streets had a long time of silent life and resistance to change until a burst of activity brought them into a new period. It was a wave set about by new groups in society and this new entrepreneurial era in both towns announced a high level of flexibility (Åström 1957; Bater 1976).

The inhabitants 1880–1915
As both streets resided in the absolute centres of their respective cities, it is no surprise that the number of their inhabitants was high. In the Konyushennaya quarters with Malaya Konyushennaya included, there lived as many as about 40,000 people, a fact that has to do with both the many storeys the houses comprised and the additional houses in the yards (Bater 1976:319). More interesting from a Scandinavian point of view is that the reservation of the area for foreign congregations had made the population clearly multicultural. Around 1900 some 10% of the population of St Petersburg was Lutheran. The Lutheran group included Germans, Dutch, Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Finns (Holtrop & Slechte 2007). The Swedish congregation consisted of 5,200 members before the First World War and the Finnish Church had over 17,000 members. At most St Petersburg housed 24,000 Finns, which meant that St Petersburg in 1880 was the second biggest “Finnish” city; Turku (Åbo) at that time had 21,500 and Helsinki 38,700 inhabitants. As some of the Finns were Swedish speakers, four out of five members of the Swedish church were actually Swedish speakers from Finland, the Danes and Norwegians also being part of it (Engman 2004:343–349).

All in all this meant a Scandinavian and Finnish touch to the Konyushennaya
blocks. Although only some of the Scandinavian and Finnish citizens actually lived in these surroundings – the Finns for instance 4–6% in the area – on Sundays and at other church times it must have been evident that this was the block for people of this “foreign” faith. The historian Max Engman, who has studied the Scandinavian population of St Petersburg in detail, has argued that the objective landscape set its imprints on the subjective landscape and that the Scandinavians therefore became multiculturally defined (Engman 2004:343). One could also argue that by their spatial practices the Scandinavians made their imprint on these quarters. Of the celebrated families the Nobel family was to become the most famous. The family of Ludvig Nobel, one of the “Brothers Nobel” and an elder brother of Alfred Nobel, the founder of the Russian oil industry in Baku, had had their quarters at 29 Bolshaya Konyushennaya in the 1870s and 1880s. This is thus the site where the whole St Petersburg Nobel family had their origin (Kirikov 2003:93). Because of such “foreign pockets” the mixture of cultural traits was obvious and the result was a very multicultural street. The languages used have also been studied and knowledge of three languages was not rare. This should not overshadow the fact that, as this was a densely populated area, it was the Russian culture that dominated (Engman 2004:359–368).

The population of the Esplanade was also bilingual. In 1890, before the turn of the century the proportions of Swedish speakers and Finnish speakers were even, 45.5% versus 45.6%. Thus it is easy to understand that the language mix at the turn of the century was great. The commercialism of the streets, on the other hand, also contributed to their international stance. That the planned multicultural stance had survived meant that the streets had resisted change. In the case of St Petersburg the planned outset had, on the contrary, been an abrupt but controlled intake of foreign influences according to the master plan of Peter the Great.

II. Glimpses of Commercial life around 1900

To understand the later development and upheavals one must get some more glimpses of the commercial history of the streets. The buildings on both streets were built to house large shops on the ground floor, which meant that they were planned for interchangeability in their establishments. Bolshaya Konyushennaya was (and is) a straight street. At the corner of Nevsky Prospekt was the Dutch Church but it also housed stores of different kind, which must be considered as flexible. This was the busiest part of the street in the same way that the Esplanade had its busy corners. A celebrity place was the Café Dominic in house number 24, which was the first of its kind in Russia in that it contained a hotel, a restaurant, a café, tavern and eating house. It had a long history from the 1840s to the 1910s (Kirikov 2003:72–73). From pictures before the revolution in 1917 one can see shops with spectacular names such as the Moroccan Bazaar, the great Paris Magazine and some hotels such as Medved, the Bear, which made the street into a very lively city passage. The names allude to cosmopolitan but also Russian traits. Modernity came into concrete shape with a shop named “Kodak”, for photographic equip-
ment, bookstores and cinematographic offices (Kirikov 2003:173–174). Altogether the street took on a modern and international stamp, where consumption played a strong part.

In the direction of the Court Stable, from which the street has its name (Konyushennaya means “stable”) a big department store had been erected in 1908
in a compromise between the Art Deco and neoclassical styles designed by the architects E. F. Virri and S. S. Kritinsky and open to the public in 1909. It consisted of an atrium gallery in three stores constructed for consumption in the latest style of those days. It looked quite new and its enormous gallery window was thought of as being in a dialogue with the outer world (Kirikov 2003:125, 127). The name of the department store was the House of the Economic Society. It had some difficulties in the beginning, but its days of splendour came in the years before the revolution (Kirikov 2003:126). Together with the other shops on the street level the department store created a centre for consumption before the revolution. This department store was a symbolically gigantic step into the future (Kirikov 2003:126) and showed a very flexible attitude towards commercial novelties and fashionable architectural styles.
The Esplanade, for its part, started to build its commercial life from the old Union Street to the east. This Union street had been the liveliest and most exclusive street, with many shops for consumer goods. As the new house construction began on the Esplanade, replacing old wooden houses, the consumer district was enlarged (Meinander 2012; Åström 1957: 201). The first important shop was Edlund’s bookstore, still in a low stone house. It was there from 1862 to 1918. One of the oldest cinemas from 1907 was also situated here. The largest new building was next to it, the Grönqvist building that took up a whole block. It housed fourteen shops on the ground floor: specialists in furniture, textiles, shoes, linen, colonial goods, vines and tapestry (Ollila-Toppari 1976:64–65). A special store of interest was Mother Grape’s shop for clothes, which also made students’ caps, the mark of university students. The next block housed the famous Kämp Hotel, the equally famous Catani restaurant and the Mercurius building, a great business property. In this house the first large shop windows in Helsinki were built. It also housed the Panorama International, which can be looked upon as the forerunner of the early cinemas in Helsinki (Ollila-Toppari 1976: 87). Readiness to adopt novelties made the street distinguished in terms of a new modernity. In the next block again was a passage, “Wredeska passagen”, built in 1892 (80 metres long and 8 metres wide) across the block to Alexander Street, housing several shops: equipment for fireworks and masquerades, a delicatessen butcher shop, Café de Passage and later on variety theatres. The architect K. A. Wrede is said to have travelled to the great European metropolises and especially admired the Gallerie Sain-Hubert (1847) in Brussels (Ollila-Toppari 1976: 87). Such a passage in Helsinki took the whole city into a new era and functioned as a mark of Helsinki as the commercial capital. The block had apartments until 1905, when agencies and offices slowly begun to replace them. From 1897 the Argos building in French palace style housed the Wulff stationery and office equipment store that served the growing industrial and trading firms. On the other side of Central Street, the Cinema Kino-Palats opened in 1910 and was a much beloved cinema until it was demolished in 1965 (Ollila-Toppari 1976:86–87). Well into the century, in 1930, the most prominent department store, Stock-
mann’s, was erected at the end of the Esplanade right ahead of the Swedish Theatre (Finnilä 1993; Kuisma et al. 2012). It was designed by the famous architect Sigurd Frosterus, a prominent figure in the modernist movement, which aimed at breaking with the Finnish romantic nationalism in architecture and instead proclaimed a modern European rationalism. At his heart lay the promoting of the modern city and industrial endeavours. According to him change was needed and it had to be carried out with a fixed purpose. The goods offered were of high class and with the building the Esplanade acquired a brand new establishment, with new consumer practices (Kuisma et al. 2012).

The Esplanade in Helsinki and Bolshaya Konyushennaya in St Petersburg were rapidly becoming centres for a commercial life with commodities, restaurants and hotels of high standard. They were sites for a modern fashionable urban life at the beginning of the twentieth century. The goods on offer were clearly directed to a wealthy class and the consumers seen in photographs of the times seem to be both such people of wealth and also their servants sent on errands. One also gets glimpses of modern phenomena à la Walter Benjamin: passages, department stores, cafeterias, fashion, photography, office equipment and urban entertainment with a light touch (Benjamin 1990:1–3). An urban flexibility is apparent. A certain intellectual atmosphere also came about, not only with the artists and intellectuals drawn here, but also directly by the offers, the bookstores and stationery stores, the-
atres and places to meet, notions that the block and street books are keen to report (Ollila-Toppari 1976, Kirikov 2003). What is also very clear is that the agents of these times were the property owners. The buildings in the Northern Esplanade are listed by the owners, Uschakoff, Cavonius, Palmqvist, Grönqvist and Böckerman, or by the hotels and restaurants, Kämp and Catani. They were the great actors as entrepreneurs and in charge of the construction as well as running their great properties. They could select the shopkeepers and they were the ones that hired the architects to build the grand houses. The same seems to have been the case in St Petersburg. The owners and architects are mentioned in the Kirikov booklet as well as the famous persons that lived in the buildings in the 1870s and 1880s (Ollila-Toppari 1976; Kirikov 2003). One could see that it was the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie of the cities that led the development. The affluence and the extravagant goods were signalled through the advertisements and boards and plates which can be seen in the photos of the days. Foreign influences were flexibly accepted and smoothly reorganized to fit the local scenes.

III. Divergent Paths – Long National and Isolated Modernist Eras

The Esplanade

In the First World War a divergence between the streets set in. In Finland the in-
dependence era began and in Helsinki the Esplanade in 1917 was the site where the white side in the Finnish civil war was to re-establish itself ritually under General Carl Gustaf Mannerheim (a Swedish-speaking Finn who had been a Russian officer and had had his quarters on Bolshaya Konyushennaya!), who rode in on a white horse to celebrate the victory won with the help of the Germans. The Esplanade could remain a main street of Helsinki. Now began what I will call the national modernist era, which did not change the look of the street. Both a resistance to change and a flexible turn into something more mundane after the hectic times took place. The Esplanade by and large lost its importance as a fine shopping district. In the 1920s, 30s and 40s the Esplanade thus continued to linger on as a central street but lacking the liveliness of the turn of the century.

Helsinki had expanded as the parallel Alexander Street had also been given new stone houses before and at the turn of the century. Also its “side avenue”, Henrik Street, later Mannerheim Street, grew in importance as a commercial street as the important commercial and banking activities moved there. This left the Esplanade as a more silent, but respectable street, with somewhat ordinary shops with everyday facilities at one end, and turning more international at the other where the newly erected Stockmann department store closed the whole street with its impressive building (Åström, Olsson, Kivistö 1998:39–40).

The period can be seen as prolonged through the wars. There was a small reminiscence of the old atmosphere and still a small part of the street was one of the most international parts in Helsinki in the 1960s. It was the stationer Wulff, and another well-supplied stationer, Lindell, the Stockmann departments store and the bookstore Waseniuska Bokhandeln, with its international newspapers that guaranteed that. At the other end a pornographic movie theatre manifested that cultural hibernation had set in. When the hectic culture left, nature was to win. The Esplanade changed to being a sunny boulevard in the summers, and an almost desolate windy space in the winters. The hectic activity of the city continued elsewhere.

But the street also gained a reputation as the tourist window of the city. The first commercial block housed the tourist office of the city of Helsinki and the office for the Helsinki festival weeks. The quarter housed the “Jugendsal”, a grand room designed by Lars Sonck and Walter Jung, Finnish Jugend style architects. The exhibition rooms for the Finlayson textiles, the office of Scandinavian Airlines, on a side street the Café Fabian in a new modernist building designed by Alvar Aalto in 1965, deepened the influences into and out of the city. The large Grönqvist building now housed the foremost design products of Finland at the time: Artek, Arabia, Vuokko, a photo shop and the last block Hotel Kämp, Marimekko, Finnair, and the National Union Bank of Finland, all icons of Finland. An art gallery named Strindberg and a shop for office apparatus seem to be in the tradition of the street. Some handicraft stores with a national stance such as Aarikka deepen the national picture (Ollila-Toppari 1976:62–67, 86–87). It is very clear that the best of what the nation could offer was situated here, on display for
tourists. This concentration began in the 1960s as an aftermath of the successes of Finnish design in the 1950s. At the same time it was astonishing how deserted the street seemed. The shops served as deliberate marketing of the nation, stubbornly holding on to something that did not attract much interest: an exhibition street with a very small numbers of visitors. A rare witness from an onlooker, who wrote his memories of the 1960s in 1999, gives the following picture of the Northern Esplanade:

On towards Mannerheim Street. The cinema is now La Scala, a striptease cinema. It runs non-stop, live striptease alternating with films, entertainment for all one is worth, I never tried it. There was this lamp shop Linnoix, but also Marimekko, Vuokko, Aarikka, the one in the middle has disappeared from view, but the two others have even expanded to the southern side of the street. We move forward and pass Kämp and the shop of the Finnish Photographers’ Association, where they had fine cameras and cine cameras; shops for gloves, handbags, leather wares, The Lindell stationery store, and Stella that sold fantastic fancy cakes. Its most famous product was Ellen Svinhufvud’s cake, named after a president’s wife. Then the Academic Bookstore. The restaurant Royal is in the middle of the park, it changed into a Hot Lips discothèque, that later became Happy Days, an all round restaurant under a glass roof (Technician born 1944, answer to questionnaire 1997).

Bolshaya Konyushennaya

In Russia the red revolution changed St Petersburg into Leningrad in a most radical way and if the development of the Esplanade was overtly slow in the new nation, the development in Leningrad was abrupt and devastating politically, economically and symbolically. The revolution and its symbols replaced the tsarists. Over one million left the city or perished – hunger, executions and emigrations being the causes – in the years 1917–1918 (Hellberg-Hirn 2003:98). The tsarist city died and the population changed; evacuees were replaced by immigrating peasants. Now the state owned all property. In all this turbulence a paradox was that cultural activity was instead almost furious. Very near Bolshaya Konyushennaya, in the House of the Arts, cultural life lived on under the protection of Maxim Gorky. What was almost completely sacrificed when the proletarian ideology took over was the cosmopolitanism and the religious openness of the former century. In the atheistic fervour churches were demolished and given other functions (Hellberg-Hirn 2003:99–101). The deserted central flats were taken over and inhabited by people from suburban industrial slums and in 1927 the housing crisis resulted in the famous kommunalka system (Hellberg-Hirn 2003:100–101). In such circumstances it is difficult even to speak of the appearance of some streets, but the details can still be informative and part of the paradoxical situation in the city. One of the paradoxes is that the traditional classical culture and art life survived and found a rebirth in the 1920s and especially after 1937, the centenary of Pushkin’s death (Hellberg-Hirn 2003:101–102).

In Bolshaya Konyushennaya, the strongholds of the religious life of the Protestants were degraded after the revolution in 1917 and their churches destroyed for secular and disparaging uses. The once flourishing commercial life was put under state control and the religious life could
not continue. The Finnish church became a museum and the Swedish church a sport school. In the Dutch church a new collective theatre sprang up with the name of Theatre of the Master Actor (TAM), which changed its names several times. Other theatres with variety programmes were also founded in the buildings on the street. In the corner of the Nevsky Prospekt a very popular café bistro with the name of Minutka was established in the 1920s, and also a bookstore. The intellectual stance was still furthered by an art gallery and an antique shop. Not only the department store sold clothes; there were other clothing stores as well (Kirikov 2003:89). Firms that had been owned by foreigners, for instance the Swedish firm The Brothers Graham, which was introducing elevators in Russia, left the country when the revolution broke out, and others, such as a travel agency for the North, were evacuated from the city (Kirikov 2003:96). Only the architecture and the newly erected department store functioned as a reminder of pre-revolutionary times, while the Soviet modernism chose completely different traits. The first bus firm opened here and different cultural clubs, for instance for chess, under the new political order. A League for Culture and Education had also worked here, as well as the board of the society Orion, which was a shareholder society of some kind. The office of “Cinetofon Edisona”, which promoted cinematographic development, had worked here, but in the 1920s they were gone. What seems to be clear is that theatrical activity carried on, and that several artists and scientists still found their lodgings here. Some socialist national, political and cultural organizations had their quarters here, and were able to stay here for long periods (Kirikov 2003:162, 174–175).

The department store built in 1908 was to become the first state-owned department store in the Soviet Union. It was first created as a war-cooperative commerce centre that in 1927 was given the name the House of the Leningrad Cooperation, later changed to Dom Leningradskoi Torgovli (DLT) or the Commerce House of Leningrad. Strangely enough, Bolshaya Konyushennaya thus preserved a curious urban flavour that differed from other parts of the city (Kirikov 2003:129). In the reign of terror in the 1930s all the families of the old cultural elite were deported and thousands of politically active people also lost their lives. This period before the Second World War affected most part of city life very severely, and here I will not touch upon the even greater disaster of the blockade of Leningrad in the war. It will suffice to say that 470,000 inhabitants of Leningrad lost their lives in the siege that lasted 24 months (Hellberg-Hirn 2003:101–102).

The cities of Europe are full of very complex and traumatic histories. In Helsinki the fifteen bombings of the city in 1939–1944 did not hit the Esplanade. And after the wars, development was taken up once again. The history of St Petersburg is again and again compressed into myths which honour two aspects, the heroes and the sufferings of the city (Hellberg-Hirn 2003:97–122). In such a structure there are very rapid changes in the collective memory according to the political situation. The collective memories cannot linger freely when they have no certain background or historical evidence to attach
Mark Crinson also states that because of unassimilable stimuli, urban memory is affected and a process of both restoration and amnesia can set in (Crinson 2005:xviii). The problem of historical oblivion is thus much greater than in Western development and also in what the theories sprung from it let us suspect.

From the post-war years, records of new activities on Bolshaya Konyushennaya are rare in our booklet, but still to be found. We learn that the avenue of lime trees was prospected in 1951, which gave the street a sober look, and that the Dutch church was renovated in 1969–1971 and the library there changed to a bookstore. In the place of Minutka now resided two cafeterias and a restaurant named “Cricket” (Kirikov 2003:76, 88). From 1944 the street had a house for model suits, a forerunner of the fashion house “Nevsky Prospekt” that later, in 2000, changed its name to “Mertens House” al-luding to the former address at Bolshaya Konyushennaya. In 1961 the first office in the Soviet Union for long-distance tourism was opened here, while DLT changed its profile to products for children in the 1970s (Kirikov 2003:130).

National Modernism and International Openings

The streets were still main streets in their cities, but Leningrad was not the capital anymore and Helsinki only a small city compared to other capitals. The long period 1917–1990 for the divergent streets, could also be classified according to what this era paid homage to or honoured most. It seems as if the turbulent years around 1920 gave way to silent and at times strong national sentiments and, on the other hand, a quest for normality in Finland, and in Russia an increasingly stronger state control. National and inward-looking traits characterized the streets; in Finland with an eager will to offer domestic design products and in Konyushennaya as a direction mostly to domestic artistic life and consumers who could afford expensive products like furs. But still a kind of hibernation had taken over, although the streets preserved small openings to the greater world because of their cultural stance.

The periods are long and include very tragic moments. A strange inflexibility had set in, the differentiation was low and the stagnation lasted many decades. Even in the 1970s and 80s both streets were still among the most prominent in their respective cities, in spite of their stagnation. The Esplanade received an Alvar Aalto modernist building of its own, the Academic Bookstore, and Stockmann was given a new annex in modernist styled. Big public quarrels about the facades of both the Kämp Hotel and the Argos building ended in the facades being preserved with slight alterations; here the resistance to change was expressed through public opinion. The modernist flexibility in the architecture was displayed in other parts of the city. This can be exemplified by the great suburban processes and modernist buildings, for instance in the adjacent Mannerheim Street (Kervanto-Nevanlinna 2014). But the deepened modernism would also slowly bring new actors to this urban scene of the Esplanade and the hibernation could slowly end.

In Helsinki it began in the park in the middle with the two established restau-
rants, Kapellet and the Royal, both of which were renovated and the latter got a new name. New inventions – night clubs, lunch food etc. – were enough in the 1980s to broaden the clientele. What was needed was more pedestrians and flaneurs because the tourists were not enough (Löfgren & Willim 2005). An association called Pro Esplanade came about. New offers of experiences with more fancy happenings and gatherings drew more people to the street. The association succeeded in promoting the Fish Market at the end of the Esplanade, so that it survived. The “Day of the Book and the Rose” was another event as were the fashion shows of Marimekko right in the middle of the park. The Helsinki parks department did its best to make the park come out in its former splendour. The Christmas market – not a traditional feast in Finland because of the climate – established in 1990 as “Thomas Market” became immensely popular and the Esplanade was again a boulevard in high esteem, this time full of red wooden cabins. The Esplanade was old-fashioned with its preserved buildings and this could be put to use.

It is difficult to know what happened in Leningrad at these times. My own reflections of the city from this period is one of city life that circled more around the daily provision for a living than exhibiting any experience-oriented turns. The department store that I had visited was to become a shareholding company in 1990 (Kirikov 2003:130). In the 1980s it was planned that Bolshaya Konyushennaya would be the first pedestrian street in Leningrad. In this project the Historical Museum of Leningrad was also involved. In a strange way Bolshaya Konyushennaya had preserved its forerunner status even through this turbulent period. The Gorbachev period, on the other hand, held up perestroika and glasnost as its foremost concepts and some sort of movement in the socialist society began. Bolshaya Konyushennaya looked mundane, with a focus on consumption of home products and clothes that were a little out of the ordinary. Around the corner one sign that something was going on was the opening of Literaturnaya Café on Nevsky Prospekt with a pre-revolutionary interior. The clientele seemed to be very affluent. Would this be a sign of what was to happen next?

The Streets in Upheaval

The obvious research question would of course now be how the fall of Soviet power in 1991 changed the city and especially Bolshaya Konyushennaya. And how could the obvious similarities of Bolshaya Konyushennaya and the Esplanade of the 1990s be understood otherwise than that Bolshaya Konyushennaya was to be influenced by the capitalist order and its focus on consumption. This is of course true. But a deeper angle of approach seems more fruitful. As Michael Dear and Steven Flusty (1999:74–81) have proposed, there is a remarkable change worldwide as the postmodern urban problematic sets in. If capitalism’s incremental changes and even the Soviet parenthesis could be considered as long-term processes, also short-term processes in combination with the long-term ones are evidently what manifest themselves in changes that are very abrupt. What was taking place in the 1990s were parallel changes in the streets, at some-
what different speed but nevertheless clearly discernible. These changes might have a joint explanation.

Dear and Flusty, in their innovative analytical strategy of finding ways to describe the urban processes with a mixture of modernist and postmodern categories, proposed for instance the concept of *flexism* in describing the speed and new ways of creating urban space. They also see urbanism as a process “that occupies and utilizes space, as well as production and distribution of commodities”, which depend on “reconfigurations of natural processes and their products” (Dear & Flusty 1999:75). Streets in central urban districts must be ones that constitute the last instance for some commodities when they turn from being on sale to coming into private ownership. As busy streets of commerce such streets will hold an essence of something above their overt materiality, and the activity of the streets and the types of commodities on sale will give some clue as to why the streets have gained the position they strove for. This is the question that I am looking to answer. What happened that changed the two streets in the 1900s and early 2000, what caused it to happen and what kind of manifestations did the restoration and the changes bring about?

To such questions the further inquiries of Dear and Flusty also give hints about the answers. Given the global condition that the global political economy has shaped and the *flexism* of the postmodern capitalism, it is probable that both the Esplanade and Bolshaya Konyushennaya were brought into this flexible system almost at the same time. This flexism leads, according to Dear and Flusty, to a pattern of econo-cultural production and consumption characterized by near-instantaneous delivery and rapid redirectability of resource flows. In the background are highly mobile capital and commodity flows that make it possible to outmanoeuvre fixed labour markets, communities and even bounded nation states. This leads to a possibility of very rapid changes in place-based socio-economics that are not led by national or local decision-making (Dear & Flusty 1999:75–76). One can only imagine how new ways of fast delivery and restoration of the facades of both streets came about through competent direction by global actors as well.

Before I continue to illustrate the leading thoughts of the two urban researchers, I will turn to the appearance of the streets in the process that in one instant took them from their state at the end of the 1980s to the middle of the decade starting in 2000. I will thus turn to today’s development and see the restoration processes also as restorations of urban practices, which in the globalizing era we live in, might not only point to upheavals of commercial districts but also change them into places of dichotomies of current marginalizing practices of today.

I will first describe the recent upheavals of the streets. After the stagnation of the 1970s and with new commercial takeovers actively led by a group of traders of the Esplanade, the street was again changed in its appearance. When coming from the direction of Helsinki’s commercial centre at the Stockmann department store, the street still opens up as a large boulevard with a splendid park in the middle. The Northern Esplanade houses the
most elegant buildings and luxurious shops as well as a range of cafeterias opening up to the park. Two establishments of importance that have been mentioned must be named again. Helsinki’s finest Hotel Kämp – in the 1970s in danger of being demolished – now leads its life as the most elegant hotel in town, owned by a British firm. The other establishment is a new one, the Kämp Galleria, an inner-city mall with the most expensive shops for foreign brands. Especially in summer, the sight and the sites make up a festive urban view with a touch of refinement. Sharon Zukin speaks of a change in the habitus of cities and in their social and cultural environment. In the innermost parts an urban village is recreated and rehabilitated to fit into “interesting” aesthetic visions (Zukin 2011:301). The groups of young people picnicking on the grass in the Esplanade Park seem to be in favour of urban leisure right in the middle of the city, and the urban village is here. What you do not see are migrants and poorer people. The goods on sale along the street are something new for Helsinki, international trend marks and brands: Louis Vuitton, Longchamps, at a time also Meissen porcelain, and Laura Ashley along with the national brands of Marimekko, Arabia, Aarikka and Annikki Karvinen. The Renaissance buildings are polished and illuminated up in different colours in winter. When viewed from a distance, the centrality is clear.

Late modern landscapes are often said to be more like facades of life, and M. Christine Boyer speaks of some perceivable spaces as “urban tableaus”, where a centred composition is the leading structure, thus actively ignoring the reality of the contemporary fragmentation and indeterminancies of present-day cities. Such historical urban tableaus, streets with a focus, parts with old buildings nicely fitted together or marketplace areas with a precious background, are predominantly situated in the centres of the cities and seem to be examples of historical preservation intended to give a picturesque impression to the visitors. Boyer, on the other hand, underscores that such tableaus are constructed for the today’s uses and as such are new places mentally (Boyer 2001:368–369, 372). She also declares that a well-composed city tableau is itself an incomplete and impoverished picture that can be sustained only by inventing traditions and narrative stories that thus are required for its support (Boyer 2001:440). Some of the invented traditions of the 1980s Esplanade still linger on, but the look is now extremely prosperous and chic. Historical comparisons with the turn of the century and 1900 can be made in the numerous reprints of the Buffalo and the Bullfinch.

Bolshaya Konyushennaya for its part seems to be the result of many restorations of the buildings. Smaller smart hotels, not that expensive, have opened up in the once large flats, small outdoor coffee shops have established themselves in the middle of the street under the boulevard of trees, and a clear influx of expensive shops can be seen: Italian fashion, boutiques for French handbags and some more luxurious restaurants on a side street. A clear corresponding feature to the Kämp Galleria, which is a phenomenon of the 1990s, the department store of Bolshaya Konyushennaya will once more present a
splendid appearance. Its restoration work promises a historical renaissance; without knowing its troublesome history of the 1910s, both its difficulties in the beginning and its closure and change into a very mundane though comparatively affluent shopping place in the Soviet system, one could even ponder about its status. Could it be a replica to underscore the historicity of the street or is it a pastiche of something that never came true? Its elegance is a strange reminiscence that points to a capitalist St Petersburg wakening up. Newcomers among the shops are the rapidly established Lego, Brunello Cucinelli, Louis Vuitton, Dior, a fur gallery and numerous design shops, for instance an “Interni Salon” with international brands such as Ronald Schmitt, Artemide lamps, Poggenpohl and Kettaker and in another design gallery Bulthaupt, Grange and Lignet Roset. In Armani Casa one can buy Hermes scarves, Puifurcat kitchenware and Saint-Louis lifestyle commodities. The names of the boutiques such as “Franuskaya Galleria” and Moderno Bellisimo (Kirikov 2003, 26, 175) seem somewhat spurious. As a national equivalent we also meet with the Russian Imperial Porcelain Factory, which hibernated by the name of Russian Lomonosov Factory in Leningrad, at number 2 Bolshaya Konyushennaya.

Thus we can point to the facts that international commodity flows are apparent, but not just any flows, but those of a very
high level and distinct design type. The affluence of the commodities and hence the customers is at least one kind of symbiosis that could be found in the streets. Another upheaval and return concerns the Scandinavian presence. The churches have been given back to the former congregations or successors to them, a Finnish House, with trading representatives and a Russian-Finnish Chamber of Commerce has been established in 2009 as a neighbour to the Finnish Maria-church. The small side street Shvedski Perelyok has got a Swedish restaurant named Walhall Due to the small hotels the atmosphere is once again very international.

The publication of the booklet Bolshaya Konyushennaya can also be seen in the light of historical restoration. After the Soviet era, with its official secrecy in all aspects of public and private life, this little book on the street and similar books on other streets are now giving back their official history from the eighteenth century up to the present. The book can act as a “balancing historical evidence” in the up-
heaval process of the street. The former glory comes alive in a matter of fact way. The popularity of the St Petersburg street books and “From the Buffalo to the Bull-finch” and its successors show the huge interest in the history of the cities at the turn of the century 2000. With the two popular books 1976 and 2003 the details have been preserved and the changes in the new millennia can be reappraised from a solid footing.

As streets are public and the streets Bolshaya Konyushennaya and the Esplanade are also passing streets or “route streets” pedestrians of many types also use them. But some barriers are to be seen and the preferable customers are those that can afford to join in the consumption. Even with lesser means it is worthwhile coming here, but the questions is would one feel wanted? As a main street from the harbour in Helsinki the Northern Esplanade is the natural tourist choice for strolling and as a side street of Nevsky Bolshaya Konyushennaya might be the best place to calm down a little. The new hotels guarantee a stream of tourist starting from here and returning for rest. But clearly they are areas directed to a special clientele.

According to Dear and Flusty (1999: 75), this has to do with human action in relation to production, consumption and coercion. With their neologism flexism they try to analyse the new patterns of econocultural production and consumption. It is apparent that some kind of systems that combine highly mobile capital and commodity flows are at stake. We can also look at the streets in their new appearances as pastiches of themselves. They now seem to have regained their former status as very exclusive and elevated streets, offering commodities to a wealthy class that can buy them to distinguish themselves as the leading and trend-setting groups in their respective cities. For this situation Dear and Flusty would offer yet another neologism: The leading agents are now what they call the cyberegeoisie, consisting of a class that provides “indispensable, presently unautomatable command-and-control functions”. They are stockholders of corporations, freelancers and entrepreneurs and even members of creative professions. The global exchange of goods and information is in their hands (Dear & Flusty 1999:76). At least some of this class must in our cases have established themselves as running firms in the cities and meeting local partners, exemplifying “exogenous investment process inherent to flexism” (Dear & Flusty 1999: 77).

For our purposes, however, it is also tempting to see the bigger outlines not only for consumption but in changing the look of the streets to become more homogeneous areas. As they come to look like one another in different cities, they could thus be parts of what the researchers call Citystat or “the collective world city” that has two types of local connection: commudities for the cyberegeoisie and in-beyonds for the protosurps. Thus the commudities, which are “commodified communities created expressly to satisfy (and profit from) the habitat preferences of the well recompensed cyberegeoisie” can become some kind of commercial ecologies.

As there is also, at least in the case of the Northern Esplanade of Helsinki, a clear resemblance to the urban village, at least in summer with the park full of pic-
nickers, we can also relate to Sharon Zukin’s analysis and confirm that in such renovated districts new areas that consist of shopping streets, combining commercial interests and public parks into clean and safe districts, have been established. In such districts the use of private entrepreneurs is increasingly common and thus the public spaces are more and more taken over by private business. Sharon Zukin is concerned about the authenticity of the districts (Zukin 2011:162). In this article I have been more concerned with how the history of the two streets can be captured behind the exclusive facades. Without knowing the history behind, it would be difficult to concur with the analyses of Dear, Flusty and Zukin. I am not able to tell whether the streets are authentic or not, only that their changes go in similar directions.

Apparently my two examples were well suited for exemplifying changes over time and periods of stagnation, but it remains to be analysed what kind of understanding the inhabitants and the users of the streets – and those who do not use them – have of them. Both streets have had some resistance in changing their entire appearance, but also in the last decade a resilience to change in the direction that obscure their history. The pastiche-like return to the turn of the century and 1900 is no chance – at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki there is in this spring 2015 a play called The Esplanade, reviving the literary circles of the flaneurs – and thus it seems that the slow modernism or the extraordinarily brutal history of the twentieth century are much diminished or even totally neglected today. It may well be that it is the old architecture that is the cause of that. A street as a panorama is easier to capture than the silent or disrupting histories behind it.

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Notes
2 The book written by Kirikov has been more complicated to use as my knowledge of Russian is not the best. But here my colleagues have come to my help in checking my interpretations of the parts that have been used. The Kirikov book uses written sources from 1960–2002 and also titles from predominantly three historical periods (two from 1770–1790; four from 1830–1850 and four from 1880–1918). As in the Buffalo and the Bullfinch, the sources are not stated in the text but only in a list of literature. So the reader must totally rely on the interpretations of the authors.
3 The Buffalo and the Bullfinch (1976) was researched and composed by the journalists Kaija Ollila and Kirsi Toppari on the basis of their newspaper articles published in 1967–1970 in Helsingin Sanomat, the largest newspaper in Finland. As their sources they mention research monographs on the history of Helsinki, illustrated books, memoirs and fiction. Additionally they have used archive materials on the properties presented and interviews they conducted in the years 1975–76. Although written by amateurs in historical writing, this book is reliable in its use of sources. The reliability of the interviews is the same as in ethnological interviews and will be used in accordance with this.
4 As a curiosity one could list the inhabitants of one building of the adjacent number 3 Malaya Konyushennaya at the turn of the century: the artists V. Paterson and K. P. Maser, the jeweler K. F. Ekstedt, the Bolin family, architect
K. K. Andersson, the industrialist L. Nobel, the tailor Lindvall and K. G. Mannerheim (Kirikov 2003:36).

The Finns for instance were bilingual or trilingual, so that those from more Russian areas spoke Russian as a second language, Finns from Finland proper could use Swedish as a second language and Swedish speakers German besides their knowledge of Russian (Engman 2004:359–368).

In a two-week stay in St Petersburg I roamed the city, entering shops and a rudimentary network of restaurants. Apart from the department store in Bolshaya Konyushennaya, I visited another and some cafés in Petrogradskaya district. The overall picture was mundane; for instance, the great merchant house Gostinii Dvor housed very elementary commodities and someone acquainted only with the appearance in 2000 would not be able to imagine its atmosphere in the 1980s.

It honoured both Pushkin and other celebrities from the history of literary Russia; the authenticity of the café was guaranteed by the furniture being a loan from the Pushkin Museum around the other corner of Bolshaya Konyushennaya. To invite people to such an interior – this was not a museum – was an invitation to another world, which at that time only a few could afford. The actors of these changes seemed to be the consumption providers themselves. With cooperation and a clear plan for restoring the grandeur of the streets, the agents sought to bring about a thorough change.

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