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In The Shadows Of Nostalgia. Marta Staņa's Legacy In Latvia

The legacy of nostalgia in Soviet art and culture has been widely examined, both in relation to Soviet and post-Soviet space, it has been discussed as the main subject in a couple of exhibitions and books. A longing for the past, obsession with an older time's objects and their aesthetics and a desire for what has gone or been lost – all these things seem so familiar to the minds of post-Soviet people. Collecting Stalin's time furniture, wearing grandma's dress, investigating the ruins of the abandoned industrial buildings of the 1980's, gushing over the slides of one's parents' journeys to East Berlin etc. are not only part of the coolness of the aesthetics of hipsters but also something that shapes our current time and lifestyles. But how much and on what level is it possible to speak of nostalgia regarding the processes in the Soviet era? How could they be identified? According to Svetlana Boym, "... nostalgia is a historical emotion. It is not necessarily opposed to modernity and individual responsibility. Rather it is coeval with modernity itself. (...) Nostalgia is not merely an expression of local longing but a result of a new understanding of time and space that made the division into "local" and "universal" possible."¹

My task in this short essay is to look at the legacy of one of the greatest Latvian female architect Marta Staņa (1913–1972). Through her practice, which was purely modernist oriented, to

examine and shed light on the shift from Stalinism to Soviet Modernism as well as how these two ideological instruments in the field of architecture meet each other and depart from each other, and where the shadows of nostalgia – meaning to a project from past to present or vice versa – emerge.

Staņa's working life spans the period from the late 1940s to the 1970s. During this time frame, the development of architecture in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) underwent various stages: the retrospective manifestations of Stalinism immediately after the Second World War, which became the official style throughout the republic, followed by its rejection and the renaissance of modernism in the late 1950s and 1960s. Staņa was quite isolated in her work, remaining in the shadows of the great male architects of the era. Many of the projects implemented by her, including a number of private houses, are located in Riga's suburbs or in small towns. Her best known realized projects are the Daile Theatre building (1977), the residential building at Brīvības street 313 (1967–1970), and Spartaks Cinema (1964–1969).

Countless projects remained on paper as modernistic visions for various competitions, including those intended for overseas, such as her designs for Playa Girón in Cuba or the Budapest National Theatre (together with Renāte Jaunušāne, Imants Jākobsons, Karolds Kandars, and Oļģerts Krauklis, in 1965), in formal language the latter design is almost postmodernist resembling the Western deconstructivist architecture of many decades later. Creatively Staņa was at the height of her powers in the 1960s when she worked very intensively taking part in several competitions, designing and concurrently working as a lecturer at the Rīga High School of Art and Design (1953–1960, then known as the Rīga High School of Applied Art). However, the development of Staņa's signature style dates back to the late 1940s and continued through the 1950s. Her projects from this period showcase those qualities which would later reach their maturity in the 1960s.

Before now little research has been conducted into Staņa's legacy; only recently, in 2010, did the exhibition "Behind the Curtain. Architect Marta Staņa", curated by Ieva Zībārte, and realized at *kim?* Contemporary Art Centre and at the Daile Theatre building, bring Staņa's work back to life. I have written in my articles a few words on her projects, on which I will refer in this essay too.² But Staņa's overall practice still remains unrevealed and inspected just fragmentarily. In this essay I shall provide a short but elaborated insight into a significant project of the architect's early career that dates back to 1940s–1950s. The period which can serve as a reference point for a new view on Staņa's contribution to the his-

tory of Latvian art and architecture and that testify not only to her continuation of the traditions of modernism under the shadow of official Stalinist architecture, but also to a peculiar compromise of the time between mutually conflicting styles: Stalinism and Soviet modernism.

Architecture in the USSR would create not only a new physical, but also a mental space that could serve as a medium between the idea and its implementation. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, who have written widely on Russian and Soviet era culture, claim that space within the Soviet system was a socializing project that undertook the formation of a new person or moral subject. New ways of organizing the home, the workspace or the street would produce new social relations that would, in turn, produce a new consciousness.³

The characteristics of Stalinist architecture were introduced into the architecture and urban construction of the Latvian SSR from the mid 1940s to the mid 1950s. Cities which had been destroyed during the Second World War provided a favourable canvas on which to implement the utopian ‘construction’ of the socialist model of life on a grand scale. New general plans with radial and symmetrical streets, large squares and monumental buildings, expensive materials and symbols were implemented in the cities. For visual means of expression architects had to use historical styles, classicism and empire in particular, however, buildings neither embodied historical styles nor articulated contemporary language. Instead, they were an eccentric hybrid – with a peculiar style that people did not understand and which seemed foreign to them. It was not without reason that Charles Jencks described Stalinist buildings as ‘bizarre architecture’, saying that “... hybrid building often seeks to be hybrid and we misjudge it by applying the canons of stylistic purity.”⁴

Even though the propaganda of the day insisted that Stalinism was the only possible ‘style’ of architecture; the modernist directions of functionalism and rationalism, which had their origins in pre-war Latvian architecture, continued ‘to live’ alongside Stalinism. The projects conceived by Staņa and other architects practicing at that time are proof of that. The strong and sustainable roots of modernism are not only the reflections of international style but also, being suspended by Stalinism and censorship, became identified with nationalism and maintenance of it within the regime.

Staņa obtained her education at the Latvian State University’s (LSU) Faculty of Architecture between 1936 and 1945, in the

¹ S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 12.

² “The Architectresses”: *Soviet Modernism. 1955—1991/Unknown History*, Zürich: Architekturzentrum Wien, Park Books, 2012, p. 47—53; „Expired Monuments: Case Studies on Soviet-era Architecture in Latvia through the Kaleidoscope of Postcolonialism”: Latnag, *Studies on Art and Architecture*, t. 21/3-4, 2012, p. 76—93.

³ *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, eds. D. Crowley, S. E. Reid, New York, Oxford: Berg, 2002, p. 3.

⁴ Ch. Jencks, *Bizarre Architecture*, London: Academy Editions, 1979, p. 10.



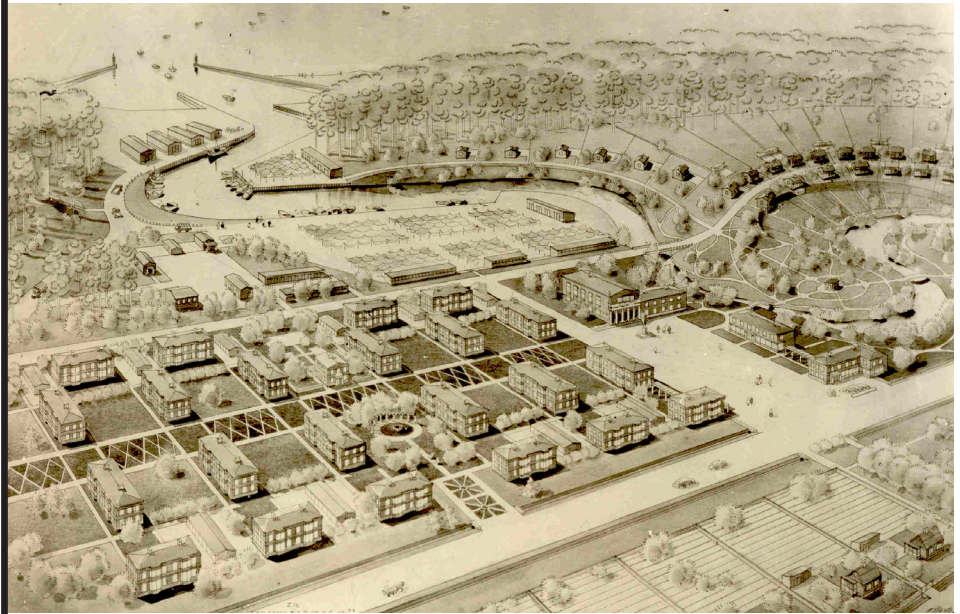
Marta Staņa with Ernests Štālbergs.
Photo: unknown, date: unknown.
Latvian Museum of Architecture,
no. S11-97/1

period when manifestations of Stalinist architecture were implemented and started to be realized. While studying at LSU she was deeply influenced by the personality and style of her tutor, the architect Ernests Štālbergs (1883–1958), who was a passionate defender of modernism. During that time, she formed and cemented her views in the logical tending and continuation of the traditions of functional and rational architecture. Štālbergs was one of the rare individuals who dared to represent modernism openly during the Soviet era and through his ideas battled against the orientation of Stalinism towards the adaptation and application of historical styles. He was the Dean and a professor of the LSU Architecture Faculty and headed the architecture design studio ‘C’ until 1950 where, in addition to Staņa, many other Latvian architects studied. Under Štālbergs’ guidance, Staņa took part in a number of design competitions from 1945 to 1947. Štālbergs’ signature style is characterized by the simplicity and clarity of structural forms, logic and functionality, and visual linguistic minimalism – qualities which also became important for Staņa.

In 1950 Staņa started to work on one of the most notable projects of her early career – the general plan and buildings for the fishermen’s collective farm Zvejnieks cooperative association (at that time she worked at the Institute for the Planning of Collective Farms (Kolkhoz) projects). This project by Staņa, on which she worked for almost 10 years, has not been fully evaluated and studied before now, although it can be considered to be an authentic one, an unprecedented case at that time. The main sites at Zvejniekciems, around which the complex structure of the ter-

⁵ P. Dzintars, *Skultes zvejnieku artelis 'Zvejnieks'*, Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1954, p. 53.

General plan of fishermen's collective farm *Zvejnieks*, beginning of 1950s



Zvejniekciems' Palace of Culture.
Photo: Maija Rudovska, 2010



Zvejniekciems Palace of Culture.
Photo: unknown, date: unknown.
Archive of *Zvejniekciems Palace of Culture.*

ritory is formed, encompass a palace of culture and school as well as residential buildings. The main building, which was to serve as the 'heart' of the centre of the new collective farm, was the palace of culture which was given the name *Zvejniekciems new palace of light*.⁵

The architecture of *Zvejniekciems' palace of culture* (1956) is a peculiar example of the era. At first, it seems like quite a typical example of Stalinist architecture: a four storey building, planned in the form of a square, a massive building with a central entrance and minimal decoration on the façade, where the emphasis is placed on the material, proportions and silhouette. The entrance section is emphasized with a colonnade, which is characteristic of Stalinist architecture and palaces of culture in particular. In spite of the fact that the building's silhouette can be seen from a distance and the greenery zone gives the drive in section a representative role, there is a distinct moment of intimacy once you reach it. Unlike other Stalinist buildings, this example does not repel the visitor. On the contrary, it is inviting. Stalinist architecture is characterized by 'withdrawal' or 'rejection' in the form of buildings with enormous dimensions and peculiar proportions which usually give rise to a feeling of fear. Alleys, promenades and parks that are created as processional routes which one has to traverse to arrive at buildings increase this feeling of distance. In this instance, Staņa achieves the opposite effect: the 'distance' is transformed into a moment of 'intimacy'. The building is organically incorporated into its surrounds and rendered logical and close to the environment.

The successful functionality of the building is ensured by the

building's half floors – the passages from one floor to the next which made it possible to include as many rooms as possible in the plan, creating large windows and broad well lit rooms, particularly the large auditorium which is considered to be the heart of the palace of culture. Interior details such as the decorative solutions for the upper rims of columns, lighting solutions, chairs and ornaments provide evidence of Staņa's abilities as a designer and her attitude towards the building not as a shell, but rather as a whole entity in which each detail is important. In her projects Staņa almost always designed the interior right down to the smallest details. She recruited students from Rīga's High School of Art and Design to assist her in creating the applied arts and decorative motifs for the interior of both the palace of culture and the school nearby.

In regard to the Zvejniekciems' territorial buildings one must also mention the high school building and residential houses for school teachers (1955–1959). In its own way, the school building is a unique project of its era because it demonstrates the thinking and attitude that is only gaining momentum in Latvia today – more than 50 years later. In Stalin's time, countless schools were built in the LSSR but for the most part their architecture demonstrates the authoritarian thinking model, which was to dominate the realm of education for almost the entire 20th century. These buildings reflect the centralized, hierarchical structure of power. They are almost always defined by symmetry, structural clarity, long and narrow corridors with a network of adjoining classrooms positioned opposite one another. This design is a monument to uniformity instead of the need to meet individual requirements. Staņa's school project unveils a democratic approach which only slowly began to be adopted in education during the second half of the 20th century. This incorporates an ecological approach – the building is synthesized with the surrounding environment and nature. The building is a long, stretched, essentially two storey structure. The principles of open planning are used in the design which makes the building friendly and human for both pupils and teachers. Expansive and functional classrooms, wide corridors, and large windows provide a lot of light, whereas the use of wood for both the interior and exterior generates a feeling of warmth. The building was intended to have several exits which lead to inner courtyards or first floor terraces, creating the opportunity to spend hourly breaks in close proximity to nature or even to hold individual classes outdoors.

In her school design just like in the palace of culture, Staņa has not only created the overall composition of the building, but has fully



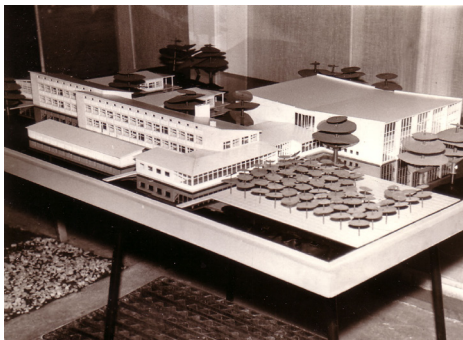
Interior of *Zvejniekciems* Palace of Culture. Photo: Maija Rudovska, 2010



Residential houses in *Zvejniekciems*. Photo: Maija Rudovska, 2010

Secondary school in *Zvejniekciems*.

Photo: unknown, date: unknown.
Archive of Zvejniekciems Palace of Culture



Model of the secondary school in *Zvejniekciems*. Photo: unknown, date: 1960s. Archive of Zvejniekciems Palace of Culture.

turned her attention to the interiors. In the classrooms, one can still find inbuilt cupboards and originally designed elements, such as a blackboard which occupies an entire wall and is also functionally intended to be part of it. The furniture design and its organic inclusion into the premises make Staņa's constructive approach to the spatial concept self-evident. Using the most simple and efficient approaches she has taken advantage of the qualities of the specific room and place, accenting and beautifying the value of functionality.

Unfortunately, the school building was built from materials of poor quality, which over the course of time were unable to ensure an adequate supply of heat and the necessary comforts. The wooden panels used in the façade began to decay; structures built from sawdust concrete began to crumble, etc. The passage of time has seen Zvejniekciems High School undergo important changes and as a result of reconstruction the originally planned functions of the premises have been significantly transformed – a number of the exits have been closed for safety reasons, individual classrooms have been divided up into several rooms and as part of a recent renovation a new sports hall has been built alongside the original building. However, regardless of this, the building's original plan has been preserved almost completely intact which is of notable value.

The project for Zvejniekciems is a supreme example of functional architecture, which gives rise to such questions as: how could it have been possible to implement it bearing in mind that during the period in which it evolved (1951–1959), the critical attitude

toward modernist architecture was still very much alive in the LSSR? Here, one should note that a seismic break in the development of Soviet architecture occurred in 1955 when a number of important decisions were made in relation to construction, though the explanation as to why Staņa's project was given much more freedom in regard to its realization can be found in the significance of the fishermen's collective farm. In the USSR fishermen's collective farms played an invaluable role because they were one of the most financially profitable cooperatives and every year delivered profits of several million roubles. In terms of its catch, the Zvejnieks collective farm was one of the most successful institutions of its type in the LSSR. Accordingly, these farms served as examples, which advertise the achievements of the USSR to foreign guests. Another notable fact is that Zvejniekciems is a small inhabited area which was not subject to strict, centralized construction norms. Quite possibly, all of the reasons mentioned here were important to some degree in providing the necessary conditions for Staņa's visions of a socially ecological architecture to be realized in Zvejniekciems.

Staņa's projects demonstrate not only the courage and talent which she succeeded in manifesting in the context of the socialist regime and censorship, but also the continuation and refinement of the traditions of modernism, creating fertile ground for processes in architecture and design in the 1960s. Especially her earlier projects, although they may not be the most unusual ones, indicate the strong roots of modernism and the ways and means of how it was maintained through the time frame of the socialist regime. The Zvejniekciems project also makes it possible to state that a real shift from modernist roots to Stalinism actually never materialized in the LSSR. There were numerous projects that were implemented according to strict Stalinist rules but the roots of modernism that were deeply identified with the nationalism project that took place in the pre-war architectural processes, never disappeared and therefore were much easier to be conceived and realized later during Soviet modernism. Thus, in my opinion, a not fully achieved nationalist project was always present in the minds of local architects, whether they were going after Stalinism or international modernism. It is possible to state that the whole of the architectural processes starting from the 1940s until at least the 1970s and even later were shadowed with the presence of nostalgia. A much deeper research has to be conducted on this subject, especially in relation to architectural processes and its aesthetics but it can be analyzed in the frame of the notion of restorative nostalgia suggested by Boym which is 'at the core of national and religious revival'.⁶



Interior of secondary school in Zvejniekciems. Photo: unknown, date: unknown. Archive of Zvejniekciems Palace of Culture



Secondary school in Zvejniekciems. Photo: Maija Rudovska, 2010

⁶ S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 14