TALKING ABOUT THE RICHER PICTURE

An Interview with **David Crowley** by Aistė Galaunytė

David Crowley *is a Professor at the Royal College of Art. His fields of interest are Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries; aspects of cultural history with a particular focus on the way everyday objects are inscribed with ideology, Polish art and architectural history. David was one of the co-curators of the exhibition* "Cold war modern, art and design 1945–1970"*, presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London as well at the National Art Gallery in Vilnius. Crowley gave a talk at the seminar* "Showcasing modernisms: between nostalgia and criticism" *in Vilnius, October 2013*

David Crowley during the lecture.
Photo: N. Tukaj, 2010

In your lecture you mentioned that there is a good and a bad nostalgia. Could you explain this?

That was not my intention. At the beginning of the talk I tried to show that modernism and nostalgia are usually seen as separate categories, at least in architecture, because the pioneers of modernism in the 1920s were usually very antagonistic to nostalgia. I am not very keen on blanket moral judgments of what is good or bad. Nostalgia is a kind of force that exists in the world, so you have to recognize the fact of its existence. Rather than see nostalgia as feeling or a sentiment, I like to see it as an instrument which is used to do things in and to the world ... Whether it is good or bad depends on the uses to which nostalgia is put. In Eastern Europe in the last decade, there has been a lot of what the Germans like to call 'Ostalgie' – nostalgia for the popular culture of communism. That was a pretty conservative form of nostalgia, one that ends up switching off the ideological imperatives of the regime and, more importantly, misrepresenting the historical experience of people living as subjects of Eastern Bloc regimes. And for that I am critical.

Well, I was thinking of nostalgia as something sentimental, as non-critical thinking. Imagine, for example if someone from the authorities has sentiments for one particular style or object and start lobbying for it. That might fall under a definition of "bad nostalgia".

Yes, I am unhappy if nostalgia replaces knowledge. If the only way that we can understand the past is through a nostalgic lens, the chances are that we will not have very much knowledge about that past, but if we try to combine some historical understanding with people's emotional attachment to a time or a place, something more interesting can emerge.

Do you think that an emotional attitude towards a building is not

enough to "save" it?

I do not worry too much about saving buildings. I am not a conservationist. But I am disturbed when buildings are destroyed unnecessarily. Sometimes developers who wish to purchase the rights to build on existing sites play on the emotions of the public to suggest that a building is bad, because it was a product of bad politics, perhaps suggesting a building it is failing because it was constructed with a redundant or outmoded technology. I think it is important to have a public forum where questions about the history of such buildings can be discussed: what is the reason for a building to fail? Has it been left to fall into ruins on purpose? Is it capable of being restored? We are sitting here in the café at CAC, a classic example of socialist late modernism. The restoration is good, sympathetic to the original architectural conception and the place is alive. So here is a building from a "bad" political – historical setting, but really it is a good building when judged by most criteria. What I am saying is not very sophisticated but I do dispute the rhetoric – often used by developers and architects - which claims that everything from the Soviet Union must, by definition, be a failure. They have vested interests in this argument.

If we come back to your lecture – you showed pictures by photographers like Richard Pare and Frederic Chaubin. In their images, is there some degree of nostalgia not only for modernism, but for the USSR, as a forbidden, distant, unknown country?

I think Chaubin's book is interesting because his pictures are striking, even sublime. He is a talented photographer, but I think he is also very good intuitive researcher because he spotted something that is fascinating about these buildings - their exceptionalism: the way in which prestige buildings in the Soviet Union were designed to stand out as visual symbols of the future - the striking point block high on a hill side or the flying saucer seemingly landed in the city centre. In this regard, he is very interested in the appearance of these buildings, in their aesthetic effects. And he has the photographic skills to make these buildings seem even more exceptional and even a little bit strange. And, I must say, a little bit fetishistic, a little disconnected from everyday life.

Was Chaubin nostalgic? Well not in any direct sense because he did not have first-hand experience of these buildings at the time of their construction and first use. He did not live in the societies – under the rule of the Kremlin – which made them. Perhaps his photographs reveal a kind of refracted, indirect nostalgia though - a nostalgia for lost experience. When a lot of intellectuals in the

West witnessed the collapse of Soviet Union, they understood that a particular line of history was being closed down and that one part of the imagination, first stimulated in the Enlightenment, was shutting down too – that of Utopianism. There was a lot discussion in the 1990s about the collapse of dreamworld of Utopia, but this of course most of the evidence of Soviet societies that remained was far more distopian. The panel-built housing blocks, the Plattenbau were the first buildings incorporated into a discourse of systemic failure. With their signs of failure – their open joints, broken window frames, poor insulation – they could serve these arguments well. But Chaubin's images point to another, rather more utopian tradition. Perhaps the appeal of these photographs is not to do with the loss of Soviet Union, or the everyday experiences of life there. Maybe they mourn the loss of the possibility of Utopia. They also provide evidence of a kind of framework for us to think about these buildings. As a survey, they make it possible for us to recognize some interesting architecture typologies and particular compositions of forms. What do you think?

There are examples of architecture which are similar to that found in the Soviet Union, but they are neither romanticized nor photographed. I am thinking of the "flying saucer" architecture that also exists in the USA.

Looking at Chaubin's photographs I could see – quite plainly – lots of connections with the work of late modernist architects like Louis Kahn, a figure who was deeply committed to a kind of essential or primary language of modern architecture... But does anyone photograph his buildings in the USA in the same way as Chaubin? Maybe the difference is to do with this claim on Utopia. A failed claim, connected to the experience of disappointment, but a claim nonetheless.

I did not really remember that period, but I was thinking that after the Soviet Union has collapsed people from the West went East because it was exotic for them, or to see "how the things were there" as they had no clue before.

Because I lived in Eastern Europe before 1989, the material and everyday life of the communist world was not a retrospective discovery for me. When I lived in Poland in the 1980s, I had to queue in the shops, I had to watch the material world failing around me. Ok, I could leave the country easily, but it does mean that my perspective on the art, design and architecture of Eastern Europe under communist rule is at least partly shaped by the fact that I lived in that world. And I am grateful for that.

And what led you to go to Poland?

In the 1980s there was a lot of Western media attention on Poland, mostly because of the Solidarność movement. It was evidently a place where a lot of important conflicts were being played out; between the people, the state and the church. That was one reason for going there. I was also very interested in Jewish history and Poland is, historically, a key home of Jewish culture. And I was lucky too. I studied there in 1987 and again in 1989. I was living there when the Berlin Wall came down, when the Velvet Revolution dismantled communist rule in Czechoslovakia. When come back to England in 1990, newspapers and magazines were looking for people to write about Eastern Europe ... I had been researching architectural history in Poland in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Suddenly my interests were not as obscure and esoteric as they had once seemed and a publisher asked to write a book on my research. I was fortunate to be in a place where history was moving very fast.

You were the curator of the exhibition "Cold War Modern". This exhibition did not exhibit the things, like furniture, electrical devices, etc., that people in the Soviet Union were really using in their everyday life. What was the purpose of the exhibition? Was it to show that "life in Soviet Union" equaled "life in the West"?

When we made the exhibition there was some criticism that said what had produced an idealized vision of Eastern European lives. That was not really our purpose. Our aim was not to be sociological by representing the conditions of everyday life. Instead, we wanted to understand what happened to Modernism in art and design in the divided conditions of the Cold War. At that time, it seemed that ideology acted as kind of accelerator; it stimulated art and design. And, perhaps for this reason, we were most interested in high intellectual ambition, in the most technologically and culturally ambitious works of the era on both sides of the East West world. We asked what are the significant ideas of the era? Did they serve the Cold War politics and, if not, how did they critique the conditions of the Cold War? There was also a second motivation. If you were to have asked someone in London before we opened the show " What did Eastern European life look like under communist rule?" their answers would be framed by clichés – words like grey, monotonous would have come to mind. Actually, these things are not historically well-founded: in the late 1950s and 1960s there was a popular mood of optimism across much of the Bloc. Some talented architects believed that they could produce high quality design within the conditions of socialism. And

that Eastern Europe could even lead design. And we wanted to show this aspiration in Cold War Modern, that hope.

It is interesting how different perceptions of the same period can be. For example there is a book by Agnė Narušytė entitled "The Aesthetics of Boredom", which reflects this monotonous, grey world of soviet Lithuania, and at the same time there has been an exhibition showing the exciting and modern designs of the Soviet era.

I have read "The Aesthetics of Boredom". I am sympathetic to Narušytė's argument and in fact, I've also written about the idea of slow time, that life in Poland dragged in the late 1970s. Strangely the authorities in Eastern Europe were always talking about revolution, but for many periods in the history of the Soviet Bloc, people were living in a slow, relatively unchanging world. On the one hand they were told "we are revolutionaries, changing society" and at the same time they were also promised "the price of sugar or bread must stay the same and never change!" This was presented as evidence of the stability of the Command Economy and what distinguished it from the impetuous markets of capitalism. So, to my mind there is an interesting tension between different kind of coincidental understandings of time at work in late Socialism. Perhaps the best commentator on this theme has been Alexei Yurchak who has written a book called "Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More" - quite a brilliant title which captures that sense of slow time and then the unexpected collapse of the Soviet system. The paradox is not one of scholarship but one the Soviet system itself. It is also pleasing for me is that the research on Eastern Europe now is broken with a lot of Cold War paradigms which, I believe, limit our historical imagination. Shortage and dissent might well describe some aspects of life in Eastern Europe under communist rule, but not all social and material phenomena.

In your lecture you claim that the Modernisms of East and West are more similar than people could imagine. Why did scholars think the opposite for so long?

For a long time, the powers in Moscow and in Washington stressed how different the competing systems were. Both were accentuating differences in the organization and appearance of the two worlds. Now looking back and looking carefully, we see that the material evidence suggests as many similarities as differences. So you can find streets flanked with glass curtain walled slabs in both Moscow and in New York constructed in the 1960s; at little

earlier you can find cars and scooters which promised motorized liberty in both worlds. Often materially these cars and buildings are better in the West in the sense of their functionality or quality, but nevertheless they are strikingly similar in design. So we need some explanations. Why are they so similar? The one explanation could be that the East "copied" the West. Historically, there is truth in that argument, because we know that some Eastern European manufacturers would sometimes copy the western products. But I don't think "copying" is sufficient as a complete explanation. I think there is something slightly psychological at work too. During the Cold War the central logic of peaceful competition pulled these two systems together precisely because they were competing with each other. Competition requires a kind of common ground – like space, like the Olympics or the chess tournament or, as we showed in Cold War Modern, architecture and design. And, in a strange way, East and West may have threatened destruction of each other; but they were also attracted to each other. There is a wonderful word which was coined by Stanley Kubrick in his film called "Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb". Maybe Cold War competition was a *strange love* between two opposing systems. To understand this phenomenon, statistic don't provide many insights - "how many washing machines", "how many cars", but perhaps the design, the form of these Cold War Modern objects reveal this desire.

When looking for references in their creative work, Soviet architects looked to Western magazines. This is often considered as the basis of copying. But to look at for references, is common aspect of creative practice in the Western world too. That fact is not often emphasized when analyzing their designs.

"Copying" is the word which carries a lot of negative associations. I think, yes there were copies. I could show you examples where US architecture is very directly copied in Bratislava or Moscow for instance. This line of thinking has the also effect of making Eastern objects seem delayed or late in some fashion. Soviet buildings always seem to follow their Western counterparts. But the question might be: "why was a building or design needed at that particular time?"; "why was a saucer the appropriate architectural expression of this particular idea at this particular time?", "What desire was being met by this object?" And desire there was. There was a lot of genuine excitement attached to new buildings in the 1960s. Warsaw had an annual competition in 1960s where the public could vote for what they regarded as the best new high-rise building in the city. Whether the winning building was a copy of another in the West is less important than the fact that it was

desired. Capturing that sense of excitement and interest is a good historical challenge.

So why do you think exceptional architecture was needed?

Of course, architects were serving power, but reading their words and their designs, it seems clear that they wanted to belong to this international phenomenon – modernism, to participate in a world wide discussion by asking questions like "What is the expressive potential of steel and concrete?" or "how might walkways and underpasses produce new kind of ambulatory spaces in the city?" Since the end of communism, architects have been accused of dissimulating in order to secure opportunities to build, that they were simply hungry for power or prestige. But reading the writings from the period in the architectural press, I don't only see big ambitions being expressed there: I also see architects who were interested in the ideas and, ultimately, in how to make better architecture. The architects who most concern me were sincere in their practices I have done a lot of work on a Polish architect Oskar Hansen, and it seems that he truly believed in what he called "open form", an architectural theory which stressed the participatory role of users and occupants. And he tried very hard to make the Polish authorities in the 1960s and 1970s believe in his theory too. He was ambitious; he was looking for opportunities to build; and I am sure that he had a large ego, but he was also sincere in his ideas.