

**DAVID  
CROWLEY**

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The Fate  
Of The Last  
Generation  
Of Ultra-  
Modernist  
Buildings  
In Eastern  
Europe  
Under  
Communist  
Rule



It's a real treat to be able to give this talk in this particular building – National Gallery of Art in Vilnius – because I am going to talk about the phenomenon of late Soviet-era architecture and its current reputation today.

If one surveys the architectural history of Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, the buildings that have the lowest status are often the late modernist structures of the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, the architecture of the Stalin years like the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw (1955) are increasingly being held in higher esteem than the buildings that came after them. Despite the association of buildings like the Palace of Culture with Stalinism, they have particular appeal because they offer up a vein of Soviet exoticism and, as such, they call for special protection. In fact, the Palace of Culture and Science in the center of Warsaw was listed in 2007. When the conservators were making a claim about why it warranted protection, they said it's not just the Soviet form of this building that counts: the memories that it houses are significant too. The fact that the Rolling Stones played a concert there in the late 1960s adds considerably to the place of this building in the collective imagination of the Poles. Architecture simply cannot be detached from the experiences – both bad and good – of living in the People's Republic. Moreover the building has a clear value in publicity terms: it now occupies a special place in the leisure economy. Its stepped profile has now become part of the international brand identity for the city.

But what is the fate of the generation of buildings produced after Socialist Realism, the structures that came to form the landscape of late socialism and lack this kind of exotic appeal?

Before I answer this question, let me offer some definitions of what characterizes late modernist architecture. How can we make a sense of these “late” buildings? Perhaps we can see them as belonging to two types. Let's call one type, ‘Socmodernism 1’. This is the technocratic phase of socmodernism. It takes the form of inexpensive, undecorated, industrialized building often for housing but sometimes for work environments too, such as offices and factories. Ubiquitous and universal, ‘Socmodernism 1’ is usually described in terms of its greyness.

We might describe this order of architecture being closer to engineering than art. Architects working in state offices were obliged to spend a lot of time thinking about building elements that could be fabricated off site, and then craned into place. The most important logic of such schemes was economic. It became, for instance,



Palace of Culture and Science (PKiN), Warsaw, designed by Lev Vladimirovich Rudnev, 1952–55.  
Photo: David Crowley, 2008



Prefabricated panel housing in Rostok, Germany. Photographed in 2006 by Till Westermayer / flickr, reproduced under the terms of a Creative Commons Sharealike 2.0 license

a design challenge to minimize the number of crane movements in the construction of a housing block. This kind of architecture was to be scalable too: lines of projection could be drawn from the sink to the bathroom to the apartment, to the street, to the micro rayon, to the city, to the country, to the world. Socmodernism of this kind has to be thought about in terms of its banality; its ordinariness: it is repetitious and low quality. This order of architecture was standardized across the bloc and is responsible for that sense of *non place* for which Eastern European housing estates became notorious.

What was the relationship of this order of architecture to the project of 'building socialism'? The answer becomes clear if we borrow a concept from historian Michael Billig, one that he calls "Banal nationalism". We live today in a world which is saturated with images which operate as a kind of low-key nationalism, he tells us. The coins and notes in my pocket, for instance, tell a national story. But the images on our money are so familiar that we don't think about them. Such imagery forms a kind of banal backdrop to everyday life. For Billig, this is 'banal nationalism' - a constant flagging but constant forgetting or overlooking of the nation.

It seems to me that we can talk about 'banal socialism' in a similar fashion. In the 1970s in Eastern Europe, socialism's priorities were flagged all the time: in the press; in the images on postage stamps; in the idea of doing civic duty. All of these were articulations of socialism. But they operated in a banal realm where the promise of a future utopia, the nirvana of communism, had largely disappeared and what remained was a kind of banal, low-temperature socialism. In the 1940s the future had been offered in a contract between the state and the people which said 'build now to make better world for tomorrow'. By the 1970s, tomorrow had to be available now in the form of, say, a East German Trabant or a Polish Fiat car; a single family apartment in a new housing block or just a packet of washing powder. Supermarkets, washing machines, highways and housing estates formed the landscapes of what might be called 'banal socialism'.

Now let's consider 'Socmodernism 2'.

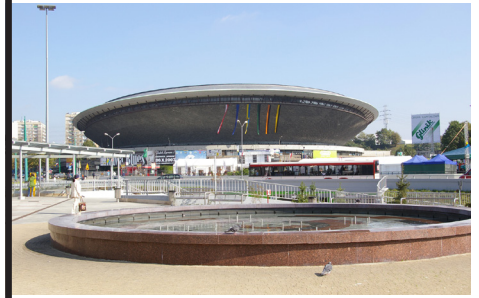
Did socialism in Eastern Europe always remain in this banal mode? Did the utopianism and promises of the 1940s simply wither to naught? Were all those May Day parades, those propaganda posters produced across the Bloc right up until the end of the system just hollow promises and dissimulation? Well, it seems



to me that the promise of utopia did not entirely disappear and that perhaps architecture was one of the rare zones of survival.

Let's consider 'Socmodernism 2'. I am thinking here of virtuoso buildings designed and constructed in the 1960s and 1970s; bravura building that show off their technology. This building in Katowice in Poland is known as 'Spodek' (Saucer). It's a public venue for sports and culture designed by architects Maciek Gintowt and Maciej Krasiński with structural engineer Waław Zalewski in the early 1960s and completed in 1970. It is a tensegrity structure, an engineered form which exploits the spans which can be produced balanced tension and compression components – a structure associated with Buckminster Fuller.

Here is later example of 'Socmodernism 2'. It is a monument to commemorate antifascism designed by Vojin Bakić, an artist associated with the New Tendencies Group. A sculptor, he created the concept of this building which was then developed by architect Branislav Šerbetić. Stainless steel panels were clad onto reinforced concrete structure resulting in this organic sculptural shape, perhaps anticipating or echoing familiar works by Frank Gehry. Today, after the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, it stands in ruins – a theme to which I will return.



'Spodek' (Saucer) – Katowice designed by architects Maciek Gintowt and Maciej Krasiński and structural engineers Waław Zalewski et al - initial design 1963 and completed 1970. Photo: David Crowley, 2008

Vojin Bakić, Branislav Šerbetić, Memorial to Partisan Hospital at Petrova Gora, Yugoslavia, 1970–1981 photographed in 2012 by tomišlavmedak / flickr, reproduced under the terms of a Creative Commons Sharealike 2.0 license



Memorial to the Slovak National Uprising in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, designed by Dušan Kuzma and Jozef Jankovič, 1963–70 photographed in 2009 by Sludgegulper / flickr, reproduced under the terms of a Creative Commons Sharealike 2.0 license



Slovak National Radio in Bratislava, Slovakia, designed by Štefan Svetko, Štefan Ďurkovič and Barnabáš Kissling, 1962–85.  
Photo: David Crowley

And here is a third example, the Memorial to Slovak National Uprising in Banská Bystrica which was designed by Dušan Kuzma, an architect who died a couple of years ago, with artist Jozef Jankovič. It is noteworthy that the buildings which form the corpus of ‘Socmodernism 2’ – like this one - were often produced by teams combining architects, artists and engineers. They were collective works. In the case of the Banská Bystrica Memorial, two structures are bridged over, forming a metaphorical or allegorical architecture that describes the journey of the Slovaks from the pre-Second World War period into Socialism. As one crosses the bridge, one crosses over a tomb to an unknown soldier.

Another extraordinary building which is worth seeing is the headquarters of Slovak Radio in Bratislava designed by the Štefan Svetko, Štefan Ďurkovič and Barnabáš Kissling – an inverted pyramid structure with a central core. Most of the of the public facilities – like concert halls - are located lower ground floor whilst all the offices are suspended off a central column so that they hang in the air. Originally, the structure was intended to mark the end of a major axis running through the city, an arrangement which cemented the building’s status as *the future*.

And if you saw the exhibition “Cold War Modern” at the National Gallery in Vilnius in 2009, you might recognize this building; the telecommunications tower in Ještěd in northern Bohemia, today the Czech Republic. Both a telecommunications tower and a hotel, it sits on top of a mountain, completing its dramatic form. Designed by SIAL architects including Karel Hubáček, this is a bravura piece of engineering took many years to complete. To deal with the extreme weather conditions on top of the mountain, the construction teams drilled down into the bedrock. This concrete shaft accommodates a “pendulum” to deal with the high winds. The interiors were strikingly modern, even chic. Major Czech glass artists - including Libenský and Brychtová - created meteor-like forms which seem to have crashed into the concrete core of this structure and lend the building a kind of space-age appeal.

The Ještěd telecommunications tower and hotel is an example of what historian David Nye has called “the technological sublime.” This term captures the changed relationship that humanity came to have with technology after the nineteenth century. Historically, the sublime describes the awe felt in the presence of nature, and that, in this moment of awe, we are reminded of the minor scale of our lives and bodies. Wrapped in this experience is, perhaps, a cosmic sense of witnessing the achievements of God. When confronting the technological sublime – namely environments fashioned by



man – those limits are breached. Man-made technology marks boundless human achievement.

Certain sorts of architectural structures that seem to capture this hubristic fantasy. They include dramatic cantilevers in which forms are suspended in the air or dynamic wedge-like structures which express a desire to escape gravity (and that seem to be indebted to Soviet Constructivism). Other expressions of this aesthetic include a kind of ‘massiness’ of form. Consider the House of Soviets in Kaliningrad, an extraordinary building which took two decades to be completed.

What holds such diverse architectural forms together as a category of buildings? Firstly, I think ‘Socmodernist 2’ buildings are usual extra-territorial spaces, that is, spaces beyond ordinary experience. This is clear when one considers a hotel on top of a mountain. But it is also worth noting that during the Soviet period in Eastern Europe, a hotel could also be “beyond the ordinary” as a space which “ordinary people” could not enter. Secondly, ‘Socmodernist 2’ is usually bespoke architecture. A tailoring term, bespoke means to have your clothes made specially for you. Bespoke buildings such as these require high design skills, high craft skills and creative engineering. Thirdly, ‘Socmodernism 2’ structures usually combine art and architecture, literally in teams of people making these buildings. My fourth point is a paradox: this is a genre of buildings, but only one which can be defined in terms of their exceptionalism. And fifth, these symbols of socialism required long construction times: some of the buildings were not completed until after the end of the Soviet system.

At this stage of a talk, an architectural historian would offer some reflections on influence to demonstrate, for instance, how “Svetko must have been looking at Niemeyer’s scheme for the Caracas Museum of Modern Art of 1955 when designing the Slovak National Radio in the early 1960s.” I dislike these kinds of analyses because they project a relationship of dependence. Eastern European architecture comes to depend on that produced in the West. It reduces all the interesting questions to one of influence. And there are many other questions to be asked. Perhaps we should be asking what’s the relationship of the design and form of a building like Slovak Radio Headquarters to power? Why was it commissioned? What do the state want from a building like this? What was the political ego that wanted this building rather than another one? Is this a form of architecture through which power laid claim on the future? Is this a building that wants to be a kind of ideological accelerator of socialism? Might these buildings



Ještěd telecommunications tower and hotel (1963–73) designed by architects Karel Hubáček Zdeněk Zachař, and Zdeněk Patřman. Photographed in 2007 by Michal Stehlík / flickr, reproduced under the terms of a Creative Commons Sharealike 2.0 license



House of Soviets, Kaliningrad, in construction 1968–88 and then left unfinished until 2006–2009, photographed in 2009 by Sludgegulper / flickr, reproduced under the terms of a Creative Commons Sharealike 2.0 license

aspire to prefigure utopia in some way?

If we consider these buildings today, many of them are in ruins. So if they symbolize anything at all, surely they symbolize the failure of the communist world that produced them. These are buildings that mark dead ends. But why are they failing? Why are they in ruins?

Sometimes these buildings have been destroyed because they are associated with malign power. They have been destroyed because they bear the “sins of their fathers”, and that they are somehow culpable in some ways. In Germany, for instance, the Bundestag decided to destroy the Palast der Republik, a cultural center in the center of Berlin, not only because it was a “ill” in architectural terms (blighted by asbestos) but also because it was a “bad” building in moral and historical terms. This was an act of iconoclasm, strongly connected with a “need” to restore the original face of the city in the form of the reconstruction of the Stadtschloss, a war-time loss. For its champions, the historic palace will restore the historic “unity” of the site as it had been organized in the nineteenth century. The proposal – widely backed – has been to reproduce three historic facades of building, whilst one side of the building and, of course, its interior will be new. The argument about restoration, as numerous commentators have noted, is hardly convincing. Why was German life under the Kaiser more “authentic” than that that in the GDR?

Similarly, the Rossija hotel in the center of Moscow on the edge of Red Square was destroyed in 2006 and a new master plan for the site was proposed by the London based architect Norman Foster. The scheme has been beset by problems but for our purposes this does not matter: what is important here claims to restore the original sight lines and spatial arrangements of the medieval city. Modern architecture presents itself as an act of restitution. That’s a strange paradox.

Sometimes these historic buildings are under tremendous commercial pressures. Land value generates ruins. ‘Supersam’, for instance, was a supermarket in Warsaw completed in 1962 by a team of talented architects including Jerzy Hryniewiecki, Maciej Krasiński and Ewa Krasińska. It was a very striking structure, particularly its ostentatious roof - a funicular system of tensed cables and cantilevered concrete forms. It was a bold statement of faith in technology when it was designed in 1959. It was also noteworthy as a supermarket, perhaps one of the first of its kind in the Eastern Bloc. Commerce was, however, “elevated” in the ‘Socmodern-



Heinz Graffunder and Karl Ernst Swora (chief architect), Palast der Republik, Berlin, 1973–76.

Photo: Jeff W. Brooktree, 2006 / flickr, reproduced under the terms of a Creative Commons Sharealike 2.0 license



Rossija Hotel, central Moscow.

Photo: David Crowley, 2006



‘Supersam’ on ul. Puławska designed by Jerzy Hryniewiecki, Maciej Krasiński and Ewa Krasińska and structural engineer Waław Zalewski, 1959–62.

Photo: David Crowley, 2005



ism 2' manner by presence of abstract art by the painter Wojciech Fangor, a major artist. Supersam's fate was sealed by the arrival of out-of-town superstores in Warsaw in the late 1990s. Unable to compete with the French or British businesses, it was slated for demolition.

This is not a particularly unusual story. What is interesting are the arguments that raged about why Supersam should stay and why it should be demolished. The property developer argued that it was an unsafe structure, perhaps exaggerating its frailties. In fact, it was widely reported by engineers that the structure was fully viable. Occupying a premium site in the centre of the city, there were many ideas about moving it too. Perhaps it could change site and function, and serve a new owner, Warsaw University. When it became clear that there was no savior in the wings and the building would be bull-dozered, new voices joined the debate. "Ordinary people" started to write about this place in letters to the press. Protests were organized. Warsaw citizens make their "last visit" there, to record their presence in the building using social media. So much for the arguments about the malign nature of buildings which were the product of malign politics. Supersam became the focus of a conflict between different values: financial values and emotional values. In the end, emotions counted for little.

Here is another recent building story. Katowice railway station was designed by a team of architects known as "The Tigers." The railway station occupies a kind of elevated platform that can be accessed by foot traffic across a bridge over a bus and car park underneath. In this way, the station is relatively well connected to city's communications network. In effect, the station itself is a kind of glass box capped by very striking reinforced concrete roof. It has dramatic pillars which the architects liked to call "umbrellas". The city came to the conclusion that this is an inefficient building (and perhaps it was). So, working with a Spanish property developer, it decided to develop a new city center in the form of a shopping complex - 250 shops and cafés, underground car park - with a railway station. The merits of the scheme can be debated in architectural terms. But what interests me here was the discussion around this turn of events. Just like Supersam, there was a campaign to save the building. There was a *Facebook* campaign and international discussion in the architectural press. Interestingly, in the face of opposition, the architect and the property developer changed the way they described their scheme. A new website appeared which not only announced the new scheme but contained a sympathetic portrayal of the original brutalist building. Moreover, a decision was made to incorporate two "umbrellas" as



Interior of Katowice Railway Station architects Waclaw Klyszewski, Jerzy Mokrzynski and Eugeniusz Wierzbicki with structural engineer, Waclaw Zalewski 1959–72



the entrance to the station (somewhat obscured by the blobitecture of the shopping centre).

This gesture didn't placate the protestors. "This is a destruction of one of the most important Polish architectural monuments" and "We blame the architect" they announced. And just few days ago - the end of August 2010 - when the doors were shut and bulldozers came in, the protestors mounted a kind of vigil. What really interests me here is the way in which the property developer seems to recognize Socmodernism as heritage. A form – the "umbrellas" - which was structural and architectural is shifting to become an image. It's becoming like a branded identity for the new scheme. It doesn't have a function in the building, except to say we remember the past.

Katowice railway station is the "victim" of globalization. Other ruins are produced in other circumstances. Bakić and Šerbetić's "Memorial to the Partisan Hospital" entered into its ruined state during the Yugoslav Wars. It had been built as a monument of anti-fascism and peace, and perversely, in the 1990s, it became a place from which shells were fired and soldiers were quartered. If you go there today, it's leaking and superating, full of rust and strange primitive graffiti. Military objects, military jackets, and stretchers for carrying the dead litter the floor.

Other ruins have other origins. A late example of Socmodernism, the Forum Hotel, stands opposite Wawel in Kraków, a national symbol, on the other side of Vistula River. A massive cantilever form lifted itself of the ground, it was designed in the late 1970s and opened, belatedly, in 1988, a bad year for a socialist hotel. Now it is empty. Only in operation for five six or seven years, it appears to be left to rot because the developer which owns the building and the prestigious site is in a standoff with the city authorities. Proposals to construct chic apartments have been rejected by the city. And it appears that the building has become a victim in this stand-off: the more ruined it becomes, the more embarrassing for the city.

As weeds grow out of the spilling concrete, this space has become more attractive, at least to young artists. In 2006, photographer Monika Wiechowska recorded the building in its decrepit state, in images which show it swathed in the mist rising of the Vistula or with its interiors decaying, apparently abandoned. This is a structure that seems to be going back to nature. Wiechowska's work speaks to the classical tradition of the ruin - think of Piranesi. Time will out. But when I saw photographs, they also reminded



Forum Hotel, Kraków, designed by Marta and Janusz Ingarden for Orbis, the national tourist board in Poland (opened in 1988 and closed in 2004).

Photo: David Crowley, 2010

me of Walter Benjamin's words too. When he looked at Atget's photographs of Paris, he said: "It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence". Perhaps the Hotel Forum is the scene of a crime too.

Nicolas Groszpiere's photographs of the Hydroclinic designed by Aušra and Romualdas Šilinskis in Druskininkai, Lithuania in the mid 1970s point to something similar, namely the idea of the abject building. Abjection describes an often traumatic state of existence, one between being an object and a subject, or of being neither alive nor dead. The abject points to the end of things, but also to a primal state, a state before language. Modernism in ruins is a kind of widespread trope in contemporary art, and, of course, one which is not limited to the former Eastern Bloc but it does seem quite marked in this part of the world. What is its widespread appeal?

The same photographer, Nicolas Groszpiere, provides another variation on this theme: that is the idea of taking the ruin and restoring it back to perfection; to make Socmodernism better than it ever was. In another series of photographs, Groszpiere presents images that appear to describe the interiors of an embassy from a forgotten or lost Eastern European country, or perhaps an entire Bloc. The country is, perhaps, no longer socialist, but its embassy still is. It's like an island floating somewhere in the world. Photographing actual spaces, he has inserted "tell-tale" details, additions like the security guard or a hanging towel. Empty, the embassy has traces of life. It is not a place – perhaps we might call it a nonplace – and yet it is so "placeable": we know it's from Eastern Europe.

So what defines this architecture and these interiors? What defines these spaces? And why are these photographers so drawn to these Socmodernist interiors? Is this a kind of anti capitalist reflex? When the present seems so inhospitable, do we desire the past? Is this nostalgia? Nostalgia is dangerous for art: it is a path to kitsch. Could it be that these images are about capturing the past in order to try animate or anticipate a different kind of future? Perhaps they represent a kind of nostalgia for *what could have been*.

To end, let me go back to 'Socmodernism 1', to reflect on one vision of the future. 'Socmodernism 1' is an order of buildings in which many millions of people make their lives. And the questions facing this architecture remain significant. Today, most architects talk about prefabricated panel construction housing in terms of technical



Monika Wiechowska, "Garden" in the "Hotel Forum 1988–2006" photographic series, 2006. Courtesy of the artist



Nicolas Groszpiere, image from  
“The Embassy” series, 2008



Nicolas Groszpiere,  
Hydroclinic, 2004

problems, asking how do we improve the efficiency of these buildings? Or in terms of social problems - how can we make them more secure? I would like to show one example of an artist who thinks about them in a different way.

“Behind the Iron Gate” (Za Żelazną Bramą) is a large high rise housing estate in Warsaw, designed by Andrzej Skopiński, Jacek Czyż, J. Furman, J. Józefowicz, constructed between 1965 and 1971. When it was first developed, it was the focus of considerable popular enthusiasm. Small apartments were accompanied by generous entrances and the lobbies because, according to the new social order, such estates were supposed to produce a new kind of sociality. Unsurprisingly, today “Behind the Iron Gate” is usually associated with social breakdown and with anomie – familiar social problems that are difficult to resolve with small, short-term fixes.

Jaroslav Kozakiewicz – a figure who somewhere between an architect and an artist - has taken a longer view. He asked a question in the form of a film: what would these buildings be like if climate change changes the environment in Warsaw?

Crowley plays a clip from Kozakiewicz’s film “Nature of/for

Living”, showing spores growing in the concrete of the buildings of the “Behind the Iron Gate” estate with following voice-over narration:

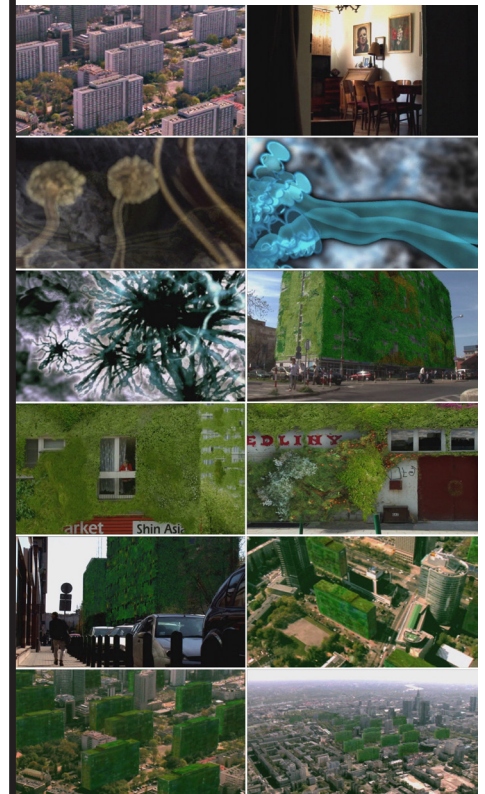
*Despite a long-going public debate that involved the best specialists in the field, the problem of a prefab-concrete high-rise block settlement in the very centre of the city seemed in possible to solve. It would probably still be discussed – were it not for the changes caused by global warming. Major shifts in temperature and humidity levels had a powerful act on the structure of the buildings’ walls. It turned out that the micro-organisms for decades inhabiting the micro-cracks in the walls, had transformed their structure in order to adapt it to new climatic conditions. Cladosporium and Stachybotrys prefer materials with high cellulose content and low nitrogen content – hardboard, plaster walls, paper, cloth, wood, or dust. The optimal temperature for these micro-organisms to thrive in 15–20 degrees Celsius. Plant species, encountered hitherto only in parks and botanical gardens, found a perfect soil in the pores in the buildings’ walls.*

The images on screen now show the housing blocks completely covered in green plants. The voice-over continues:

*Then it turned out that walls overgrown with vegetation provided a great insulation layer helping to maintain a stable temperature inside the building. Green organisms consume high amounts of carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, and, in some cases, supplement the residents’ diet. Empty apartments awaiting new inhabitants become common property, turned into small vegetable gardens. Thanks to this unexpected transformation, the city centre has gained over 14 hectares of biologically active surface, consuming some 650 tons of carbon dioxide annually.*

Here’s an alternative future. It is interesting to think about the differences between this film and those other images which I have presented in this talk here. In Kozakiewicz’s future – the return of concrete to nature is somehow productive. In this way, he tries to kind of claim a different sort of future, one that is different to the doomsdays scenarios that appear in our culture. This is an ironic film, don’t doubt me, but nevertheless it builds a future from the most abject objects of Socmodernism, the housing bloc. In it, ‘Socmodernism 1’ saves the world.

That’s the end of my talk.



Still from Jarosław Kozakiewicz, “Nature of/for Living”, video, 2007