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and  
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Modernism  
In  
Soviet  
Lithuania:  
The Rise  
And Fall  
Of Utopia



**Vaidas Petrulis:** Good evening everybody; I am really pleased to see so many people in this room. It is a great honour for me to have been invited to talk here. Our talk will consist of two parts. First of all, I will make a short and general presentation about the interactions between modernity and Soviet utopia. Then Marija will introduce her study on residential housing as an incarnation of this utopia.

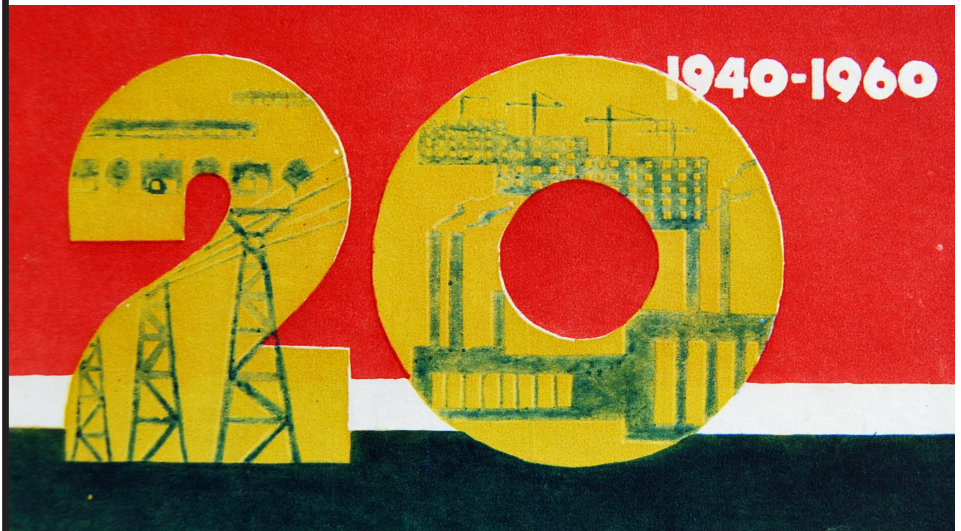
Speaking about the architecture of the Soviet era, we must inevitably touch upon the issue of ideology. However, this is not because ideology is somehow incompatible with architecture; the Soviet era, as you may know, had certain peculiarities, and one of these peculiarities was the fact that the culture of that period itself used architecture for ideological purposes. When we see a poster “20 years of Soviet Lithuania”, we see construction images in the background. So, architecture really was an important attribute in the construction of socialism, which can be observed in this image.

But was it really solely a Soviet phenomenon? Far from it. Conrad Hilton has said that *“of course, hotels are businesses, and we operate them for this reason in this country, as in every part of the world, but besides we have to say something about communism, and our hotels are a certain opposition to this communist society”*. Thus, the ideology in architecture, especially if we take the architecture of the 20th century is clearly common to both sides and we can hardly say that Soviet architecture is distinct in some way. Another question I want to ask myself is: can we put an equals sign between a socialist city and a modernist city? Do they have anything in common? Was the Soviet period somehow exceptional, or was it rather a part of some general process? My answer would be: yes, but with some reservations, to which I am going to devote the whole lecture.

There are a lot of these general processes of Modernism. If we compare a few quotes from 1960 and 1962 on how a perfect city in a communist society was envisioned, we can see a lot of rhetoric, such as, “each central settlement will have a stadium of its own, a park of its own”, etc., which is essentially characteristic to modernist rhetoric in general, or to be more precise, interwar modernism, not later.

*“There’s a need to say that every central settlement will have their own stadium, park and cultural function buildings that will be dominant in their central parts. Household buildings will be a bit further and separated by green walls. There will be streets with planted trees all around the settlement, nice houses from both*

Poster “20 years of Soviet Lithuania”, in: Lithuanian humor magazine *Šluota*, 1960, No. 14, p. 5



Cartoon, in: *Šluota*, 1962, No. 7, p. 7

*sides and small gardens next to them.”*

*“Communist cities need to be light and spacious, built up with nice buildings, where architecture organically connects with nature using wide highways, waterfronts, parks and gardens. Cities need to be convenient to citizens. Residents will be innovatively served by communal, public catering and marketing companies.”*

If we remember Le Corbusier and one of his most influential treatises *Towards an Architecture*, which he wrote in 1923, we can see such things as reasoning about the land ownership, in that private land ownership was really an outdated form and the need for the community ownership of land was being emphasized. The reasoning about the new world order, which must be made available to everybody, to all the proletariat and this proletariat incorporates intellectuals as well as workers.

All these ideas that were broadcasted by the Soviet Union were closely connected to the general ideas of Modernism. Then the question follows as to whether there were any specific aspects. Indeed, there were, one of the most important of these was the development of a new identity of a Soviet citizen. In this development a major role was played by literature, art, theatre and cinema, and the education system as a whole. But architecture also participated in this. I would suggest several points, and one of them was the attempts to position Soviets in comparison to the West, first of all saying that Soviets had everything much better than the West.

Concerning architecture we can observe a cartoon, mocking America, saying that the USA had ostensibly “solved” the housing problem. This cartoon is quite early though, from approximately 1960s, but in 1979 Robert Venturi and experiments by the British



group Archigram were referred to as anti-architecture. Postmodernism was accepted, discussed, but always introduced as a mistaken path. In the architectural history books, such as, for example, *The Architecture of the Soviet Lithuania 1987*, such concepts as style or ideological things were not discussed, they were taboo as they were understood as 'too close to the West'. It is interesting to notice that even as late as in 1969 communist leaders still tended to compare Soviet Lithuanian republic to the pre-war Lithuania: "well, they had a plan to build brickwork Lithuania, but it was only us who were able to implement it."

The secularization of society goes hand in hand to this opposition, especially in the Khrushchev period. It was also particularly important in the construction of the identity of the urgent need for those living in Soviet Lithuania to feel that they are a part of this whole massive Soviet Union. If the West was depicted as evil, in parallel to this the Soviet Union was pictured as being a place where everything was beautiful. This was especially characteristic to the earlier Soviet times when magazines were full of images of the construction of the Volga – Don Canal, Moscow metro, skyscrapers, etc. These processes were inevitably accompanied by what we call ideology today. David Crowley was talking about Modernism 1 and Modernism 2 in his presentation; I think that in the same way when referring to the Soviet ideology, we could make a distinction between Ideology 1 and Ideology 2.

All of you remember the House of Scientists and the National Library in Vilnius. I also like this picture from Klaipeda in Soviet times. It shows a wooden birdhouse with a pediment added. Once we decorate, we decorate everything! The direct Red Star or Soviet medal shaped elements and ornaments in architecture could be referred to as Ideology 1, a kind of visual architecture. Ideology 2 is a completely different thing, a very weird phenomenon, more characteristic to the late Soviet times when more freedom was allowed starting with the Khrushchev era when a certain freedom of speech existed.

A cartoon from 1961 pictures communism within which one can feel irony. As if we were searching and searching for this communism, but... not really successfully. Sitting with a bottle of vodka in one hand... When we read the architectural press of that time, we can find lots of different criticism. Surely a certain freedom existed but certain ideological things existed also, which tended to operate as a complete masquerade. While reading archival sources that present the minutes of architects' councils and meetings, one can find some discussions that are just beyond our comprehension



A pioneer holds a birdhouse, in:  
*Tarybinė Klaipėda*, 1957

nowadays. A person probably had to be insane to be a part of all this and think that everything was all right. For example, *Statyba ir Architektūra* (*Construction and Architecture*), the most influential (and the only) Lithuanian architectural magazine of the time even presented editorial guidelines in 1972 on how to write about construction workers for the Construction Worker's Day: "one should talk more on why it is important to work well and in a creative way, rather than mentioning what and how a team is working on", in brackets it says 'psychological aspect'. I personally doubt if creative work by a team of construction workers is a good thing. Well, of course, they can build a wall in a creative way, but architects could hardly be happy when seeing such a piece of creative work. So what's happened here is that a part of the discourse of architectural culture had completely lost any contact with reality. There were two separate worlds, one of them was real, and the other was ideological. This one I call Ideology 2.

As I am researching mostly Kaunas, so the examples are from there, though I really doubt if the situation in other institutions in other cities was any different. These modules of bureaucratic communication were common all over the USSR. Besides practical issues, agendas of the meetings also incorporated the issues of communist tasks in the further improvement of the institution's work style, and methodologies in the light of Leonid Brezhnev's books *Malaya Zemlia* and *Rebirth*, or concerning the complex education of employees in line with the Marxist-Leninist ideology, etc. These examples are from 1977-1981 but were also seen in 1987, the year when *perestroika* was blooming and Gorbachev had already made his famous speech on the need for reforms and the party's policy of cadres.

How do you think this Ideology 2 understood *perestroika*? It says here that: 'attempts should be made in our industrial work to implement the engineering design works in three months rather than a year.' What a stubborn attempt for improvement! It is easy to imagine that they used the same rhetoric back in the 1960s, but this was the end of the 1980s already, and – the same result. And this statement is followed by this: 'the trade union committee decided...' – here again we can see attempts for the sake of cadres, cadres meaning the employees within an organization, 'to welcome the 28th congress of the Communist Party and improving the employees' job conditions, the repair works had been started and tickets to theatre performances, sports competitions were provided', etc. Of course, these people had to understand it as some kind of performance, playing a role in a certain spectacle.



Construction of communism (cartoon), in: *Šluota*, 1961, No. 19, p. 2



All this is related to the ideology; on the one hand the strict ideology of Stalin's times, and on the other, starting with the Khrushchev era, some kind of macabre and weird games, with a part of them being real, and the other – theatrical and fake. Nevertheless, this Soviet modernism is similar to the general international modernism, especially in the sense that a human being is interpreted fairly strictly as a resource, workforce, a cog in the machine... If we remember the Athens Charter (1933), which gave birth to thinking about how to improve people's everyday life, the most important thing in the Soviet Union was the Planning Committee and how the industrial enterprises should be located in so much as a balance between men and women should also be found. For example, if men's work meant automobile factories, and women's – the garment industries, so in some towns they attempted to plan a proportional number of men and women's factories. In addition, everybody was supposed to participate in the socialist competition. With regards to technological things, everything was organized, one has to consider that a number of social-economic restrictions influenced Soviet modernism to become what it became. Those who are familiar with the history of architecture may remember the saying by Charles Jencks that modernism died together with the demolition of Pruitt Igoe in 1972. I absolutely agree that the quality of architecture has had least impact on the demolition of Pruitt Igoe. Social factors were much more significant as Katherine G. Bristol put it in 1991: *"architectural design was but one, and probably the least important, of several factors in the demise of the project"*. Similarly, if we consider Soviet modernism as utopia, architectural solutions played the smallest role here.

One of the factors that did have significance was the command economy. In other words, all urban planning was based on the concept of how industry had to be organized by the State Planning Committee. Then the housing estates were planned nearby and then, of course, it would be nice if each housing estate could have a public services complex of its own or grocery stores and other amenities. But most often this issue was left open – which meant that sometimes they were built and sometimes not. Due to the shortage of funds many objects were completed after huge delays. It would also have been nice to have the green areas where a worker could take a rest and, of course, the centre, downtown, which most often was also an ideological centre, with the old town being nearby.

So, the planning of the entire construction industry, based on the command economy was one of the most important factors, as no results could be achieved only through manual labour. Everything

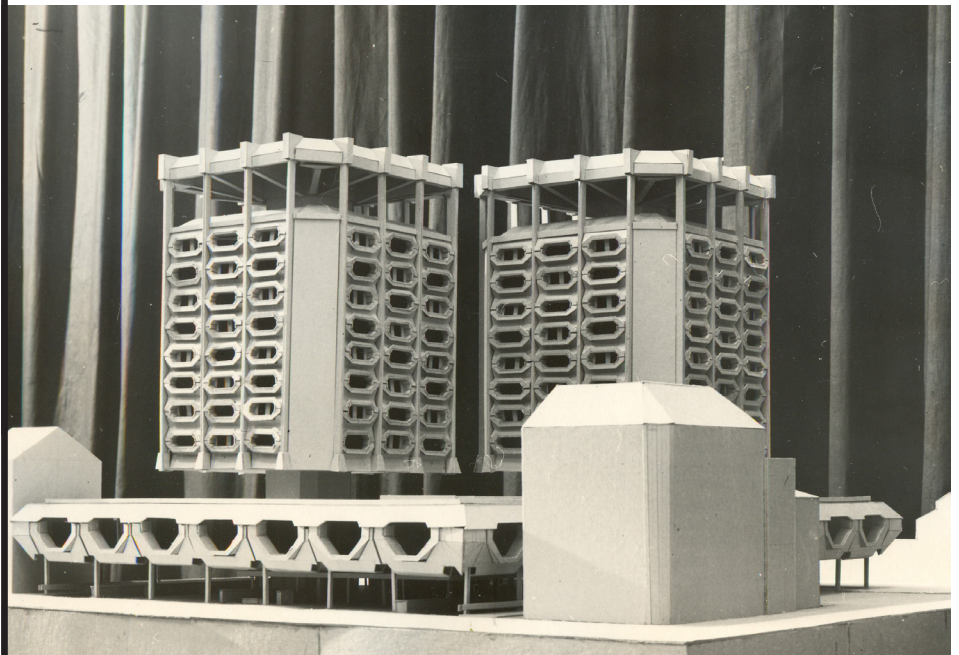


Cartoon showing inefficiency of the state company for planting, in: *Šluota*, 1962, No. 9, p. 9

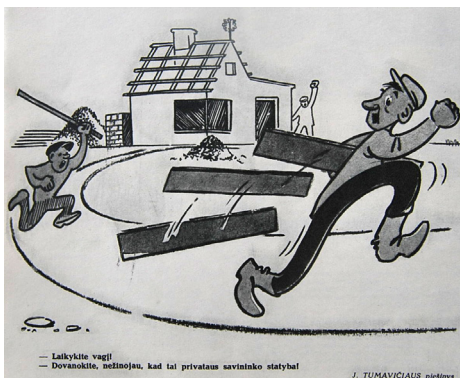


In 1986 out of all accepted newly constructed buildings in Kaunas only 69% were evaluated as satisfactory. In reality this meant they were scarcely fit for living. It is for a good reason that a standard soviet environment is usually visualised with pictures like the one from Kaunas in the 1960s (photograph from the personal archive of Vaidas Petrulis).

Design for hotel “Britanika” in Kaunas, architect A. Paulauskas, from the personal archive



Cinema in Salantai. A cinema of such a huge scale in such a small town; and at present it stands abandoned.  
Photo: V. Petrulis, 2007



Thefts from public property were common and unscrupulous. ‘Spot thief! Well, excuse me, I didn’t know this was a private owner’s construction!’ (cartoon), in: *Šluota*, 1961, No. 6, p. 6

had to be calculated, for example, how many square metres per person and statistics were kept of such things as how many architectural monuments there were per capita. The same happened with construction materials. For example, during the Khrushchev era there was a boom involving the chemical industry and it was truly believed that polymers were going to replace all other materials, so the need for metal, ceramics, timber or glass, or any other materials would no longer exist. At first sight, everything would be all right with that – a matter of scientific progress, but these things were decided politically and they were made compulsory. For example, in 1958 the Planning Committee decided that no wood was to be used in hospitals, sanatoria, etc.

These were the features of the planned economy. On one hand, one could think that everything is all right with that. But any expanding bubble has the feature of bursting. In the planned economy an obligation was placed on individuals to increase work results every year. You were supposed to make more and more each year. And if you made less, you faced the consequences... Everyone was under pressure in the undertaking of obligations. Quality suffered badly because of such haste. Mies van der Rohe once said that “God is in the details”, or “Architecture starts when you carefully put two bricks together”. It was easy for him to speak so, as he never had to read such a report: *in construction we use calcium-silicate bricks, which are not white, but of something in between black to grey colour. We are building a hospital from such bricks in Kaunas, and we will have to plaster it afterwards, as the bricks are not clean. Earlier we were supplied with red bricks, and we built a half of the building out of them, but all of a sudden we fell*



*short of them...* How can we say that God is in the details, when you make the details out of such things, when a deficit (shortage) of materials is an everyday condition?

When a cinema for an audience of 600 persons was under construction in Kaunas a construction worker was quoted as saying: was anything not in *deficit* at that time? All these materials, such as aluminium showcases, glazed tiles, stoneware tiles were officially named ‘deficit materials’. This is taken from the archival sources of the construction project. It was taken seriously. In addition to this, the possibilities of the building structures were also quite restricted. In order to build faster, better and cheaper, new technologies were developed, but when you are running short of time, you cannot afford to refuse the old ones, especially, when the introduction of the new ones requires additional effort, manpower and time, which we were short of even by applying the old design structures. This was typical rhetoric of construction workers of the time.

Once I talked with the architect Alfredas Paulauskas who told me: *I wanted to realize a design project. But the builders refused to do it so saying ‘no, we are going to do it in a simpler way’.*

Green territories were not of prime significance. However, industry and housing estates were matters of prime significance. You can find lots and lots of materials describing similar situations in the archives, how the planting works were implemented poorly, delays, etc. Another thing was spoilage; when you are in such a hurry, when you have to catch up with the planned economy, it is obvious you cannot do everything well.

On the other hand, if we remember the planned economy as an idea, for example, even the architect Steponas Stulginskis back in 1938, said: we need to plan the entire economy of Lithuania. The planned economy, as such, is an inseparable part of the architectural ideology of modernism. But what did it turn into in the Soviet Union? One more thing inseparable from modernism was public property. Le Corbusier and Karel Teige and many other modernists during the interwar period proposed the refusing of private property, attempting to make all property public instead. The Soviet Union did this, we have the results and we see what kind of results. Everybody knows Paris’s “Voisin” plan of Le Corbusier. If there had been a possibility of applying such a plan here in Vilnius, probably Vilnius would have been wiped from the surface. Of course, such reasoning is always very speculative, but one of the nuances provided by public or State property is that one may



Another cartoon says ‘Let’s cut the boards into smaller pieces. Why do you want to cut the good boards?’ ‘Cause we are allowed to take away only remnants’, in: *Šluota*, 1964, No. 4, p. 12



‘Let’s save construction materials’ (cartoon), cover of *Šluota*, 1979, No. 6



One should also not forget the building acceptance commissions, they used to accept everything that they could. 'Hold on for a little bit, the Commission has almost left', cartoon from magazine *Švyturys*, 1960, No. 8, p. 28.



Consumer services were often used for personal matters. 'Bring me some beer' (cartoon), in: *Šluota*, 1960, No. 19, p. 6

build whatever one likes and wherever one likes. It is conditional, but again, there is much more freedom for large projects.

The result is obvious, but on the other hand, we have to pay attention to the fact that similar processes were happening in the West. I probably could not say without hesitation now that the public land property and concentration of property in the hands of the state was really evil. I would rather say it was a really modernist solution. But this led to many strange cultural things, which, at least some of them still remain in our society. It states in the 1964 article "Vilnius Decorates Itself": Vilnius is an old city, having centuries old traditions, for many years a provincial centre with private construction, planning, small shops, characteristic of the capitalist order, and so on. These old traces have almost vanished, and modern socialist Vilnius" – the article continues – "is marvellous". This means that the naturally developed urban mentality with private property, where one could be engaged in free trade and which would have made it a diverse town, was replaced by the urban hierarchy systems. Another aspect to it as private property was eliminated, many marginal things prospered. One such thing was alcoholism in the work place, in the construction industry, also thefts.

We have taken an overview of an interesting phenomenon – Soviet modernism was really closely connected to the general principles of modernism. But certain social processes took place determining that many things in socialism were turned into a cartoon. Similarly, the Pruitt Igoe was demolished due to social processes. We can question as to whether Charles Jencks was right when he said

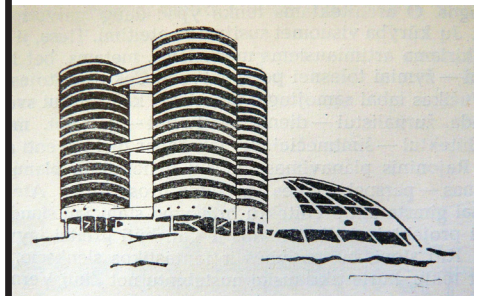
that the death of modernism came in 1972. I would rather suggest moving this date to the fall of the Soviet Union because the modernist utopia had been continuously created in the Soviet Union up to its very end. If we look through the prism of architecture and how this utopia degenerated, it could be called another death of modernism, providing we ultimately agree that there was not only one modernism. Thank you for your attention and now I invite Marija to give her interpretations.

**Marija Drėmaitė:** I am going to supplement what Vaidas has just said as the main idea of my presentation is to make a parallel of a socialist city and a modernist city. First of all, I would like to draw your attention to the book “Visionary Architecture” which we have selected to recommend to you today. Its author Neil Spiller writes: “unconditional or utopian belief in technical possibilities and progress is just one of the brightest features joining together the modernists of different countries, political regimes and periods”.

I would like to start my presentation with a picture that takes us back to 1964, and could be easily ascribed to one society or the other, just listen, how it is described:

“Let’s have a look at some brand new urban solutions. These fifteen-storey glazed cylinder towers and huge domes, connected together with light corridor-passages, are standing amidst this endless expanse of snow fields. The towers are residential high-rises. Warmed up air is supplied by special electrical devices. If you want to take a rest and go for a walk, you do not have to put on a fur coat in this town. You can go through a huge space covered with a transparent dome through a well-illuminated corridor straight from your flat. There are no seasons here. Trees are always green, flowers growing and fountains rippling forever. In a stadium or sports fields competitions are held. Music lovers may go to a concert hall. The lower floor of the dome accommodates canteens, shops, schools and other facilities. The domes, corridors and covered passage streets are heated by infrared illumination lamps, which can warm all items they illuminate without warming up the air. Energy for lighting, artificial climate and other needs are supplied by huge power plants. This is how a city will look like accommodating ten thousand people. All the buildings will be constructed out of prefabricated assembled structures, and if the necessity arises such town will be easily disassembled and mounted anew in a new place. Such design project, dear comrades, is not a utopia, but the nearest future.”

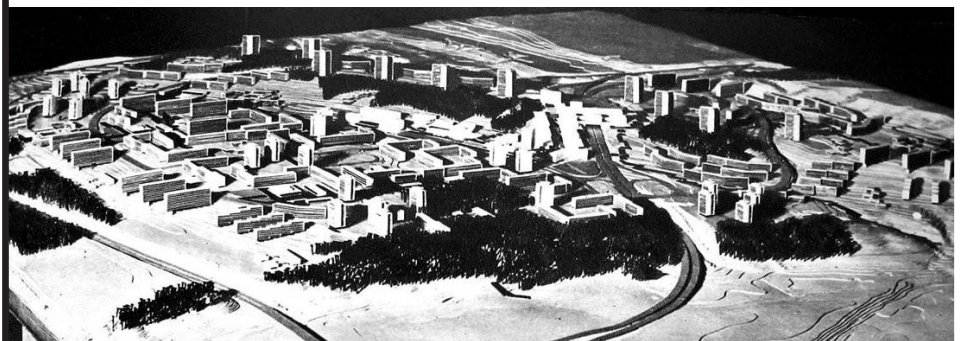
Obviously, it’s only from the word ‘comrades’ that you can guess



Future city in the Arctic, in: J. Minkevičius, *Miestai vakar, šiandien, rytoj*, Vilnius, 1964



Stockholm suburb Vällingby, 1953, in: H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, New York, 1968 and model of the Lazdynai residential district, 1966, in: *Vilniaus namų statybos kombinatas*, Vilnius, 1969



that such a vision was designed for the conquest of Siberia and the Arctic regions of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the rhetoric and the vision itself, including the use of materials and prefabricated constructions, the temporariness of the project and the elimination of the natural change of seasons, as well as any other differences, was characteristic to all modernist planning, faith and utopia.

But let's come back to Soviet Lithuania. First of all, I would like to draw your attention to one phrase by the famous historian Norman Davies, who noticed that while speaking about the Europe of the Cold War times, historians still argued about what we should emphasize: the similarities or differences? The Lithuanian National Gallery of Art hosted the famous exhibition entitled *The Cold War Modern*. The scenario of this exhibition was based on emphatic differences of the socialist and capitalist systems, which, as you go through the exhibition from one hall to another, get more and more alike, and the visitor leaves the exhibition observing absolutely identical things despite the difference in the systems that produced them. I would like to start my presentation the other way round – from those astonishing similarities, and try to find out why these similarities were so similar? Although at the end I will finish with the differences.

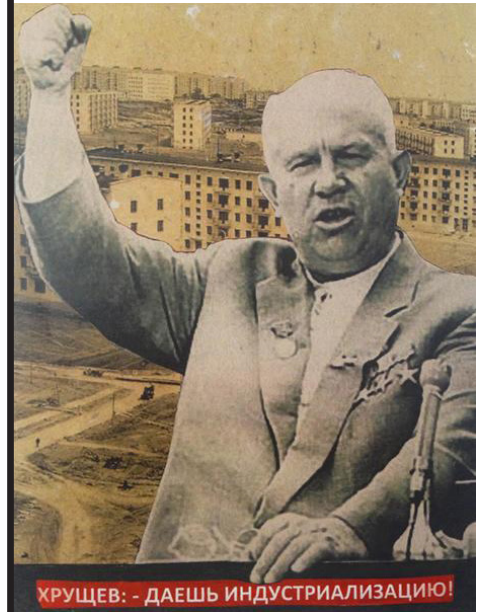
I am going to speak about this abundant and massive Soviet architectural legacy, about this unlovely and dull legacy.

Recently historians have found it especially attractive to compare

the similar looking postwar suburban images emphasizing that the socialist urban planning was not a unique process at all, but just an integral part of modernist urbanism, though with its own mutations. It is known already that Soviet planners borrowed their methods from the West. The postwar urbanization was identical in its rhetoric and planning both in the East and in the West, regardless of the Iron Curtain. Or, as the architectural historian Adrian Forty has nicely put it – the Concrete Curtain, which is much more precise, because reinforced concrete was the key material of which those huge, never-ending housing estates were built of. Earlier we thought that such all-looking-alike housing estates stretched from Vilnius to Vladivostok, but now the horizons have broadened, and we can see the same things stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. When another architectural historian, Jean-Louis Cohen, called these prefabricated blocks of flats probably the most obvious visual symbol of their time (the second half of the 20th century) we know what he really meant. I am also speaking about this kind of architecture because it is an excellent illustration of the technocratic belief, which I would call the utopian modernist illusion of happiness of the second half of the 20th century. This allows us to look at the socialist heritage not only as the propaganda machine, which sought after shaping a new socialist person, but rather as a mutation of modern urbanism in the second half of the 20th century.

As we speak about the rhetoric again, and make comparisons between the systems and their needs, we can see that the political, economic and social aspects of mass residential building construction were alike in the East and in the West. This practical need to build cheaper, more and faster was common to every country, rebuilding devastated cities after the war, constructing growing industrial towns, etc. Even the ideological aspect looked similar: social equality, team or community spirit were all emphasized on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The Western world was building a welfare state, whereas the socialist block was obsessed with the construction of communism. The new thing was that the modernization of socialism was implemented with the help of successful Western examples.

Khrushchev's industrialization or modernization could also be considered a programme of socialist welfare state. First of all attention should be drawn to the fact that in the official rhetoric the Soviet leadership in the area of military (this of course still persisted) was gradually turned into the improvement of ordinary citizens' quality of life. Reforms in architecture and construction were initiated not because Soviet architects were, let's say, more coura-

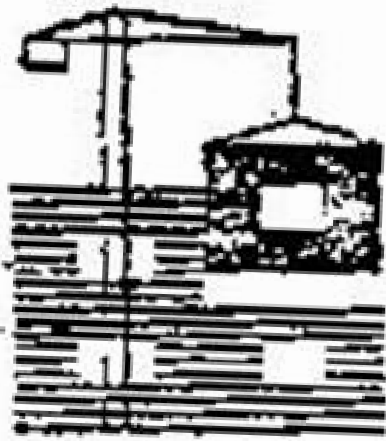


'Start industrialization!', poster  
design by Felix Novikov



geous, and they just got bored with the over-decorated socialist realism, but it was due to the elementary acceptance of the backwardness both in the residential construction, welfare and industry, which was finally admitted after the death of Stalin. Khrushchev's economic reform of Sovnarkhoz (Peoples' Economic Councils) started in 1957, was based on the belief that the regional authorities were able to speed up industry and construction in regions. The first seven years plan (1959–1965) was especially focused on the elimination of the housing shortage in the USSR within ten or twelve years and to provide each family with a separate flat.

Khrushchev's residential construction programme was a key point in improving the material life of ordinary people. It is interesting that Khrushchev, while still the communist party leader of Moscow City, had actively participated in the creation of an industrialized construction system from the early 1950s, so he was really a builder. But, as I mentioned before, the pace for the construction of communism required for the appropriation of already existing successful Western technologies. It is no longer a secret that Khrushchev himself initiated the trips to the West for Soviet specialists in search of modern construction methods.



After studying the prefab housing technologies in France, they acquired the *Camus* system, i.e. the housing construction system patented by the engineer Raymond Camus. I have to mention here that some Russian sources still argue on the authorship of this kind of buildings in Russia – whether Raymond Camus or Vitaly Lagutenko was the first. Lagutenko and his Institute of Industrial Construction in Moscow were experimenting in prefab housing construction that is true, but the first assembly line, of which the precast concrete housing construction originated in the USSR, was purchased from France. Why *Camus*? The answer is very simple, Camus designed the first industrially-manufactured prefabricated system of housing elements which had been tested in the reconstruction of Le Havre, a city which had been destroyed during the WWII. By the way, Le Havre is already the UNESCO World Heritage site as one of the modernist heritage city. The implementation of *Camus* system required three simple means: precast concrete panel factory, a vehicle fleet and a place for a construction site. Everything was organized so that as little as possible highly qualified workforce, especially the manpower, was required. A block of one hundred flats was assembled in a few months. All this looked attractive for the Soviet planners who were reaching for the same goals.



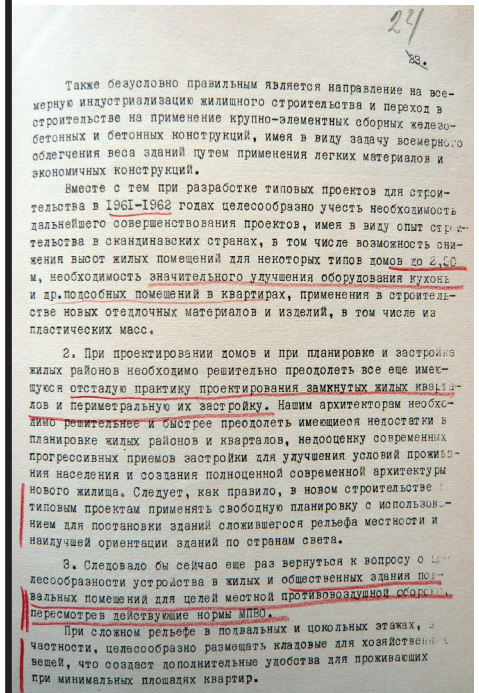
Logo of “Raymond Camus” company  
and a house (type 006) in Le Havre  
built in 1949, in:  
French DOCOMOMO

A similar method was applied to general urban planning of new

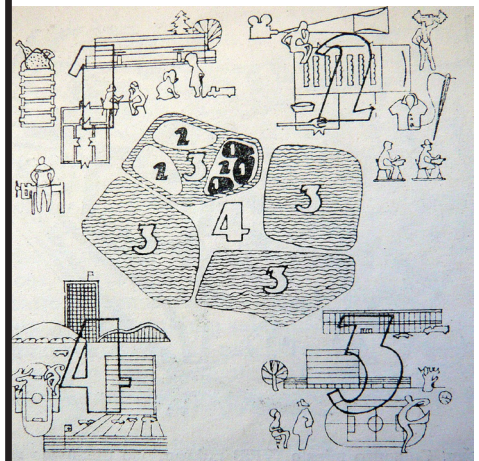
housing areas. A new model for urban residential planning in postwar Europe was the new towns or satellite towns of England and Sweden, which were planned to vacate/clear out the fast-developing cities. It is also interesting that it was developed out of the American 'neighbourhood unit' which had been designed at the beginning of the 20th century. The 'neighbourhood unit' was a housing settlement being formed around the basic facilities: an elementary school and household services, often a supermarket. It accommodated up to 5000 residents, sometimes up to 10,000, and was surrounded by a circle of highways.

When we search for the Soviet interest in this kind of residential planning, one of the most interesting documents is an official report of the Soviet construction workers and architects' study trip to Nordic countries and Federal Republic of Germany in 1957. The so-called "exchange of experience" in the area of residential housing construction and planning. The first delegation of 8 specialists over a one month period visited new construction sites in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland – about 30 new residential districts in total. Another similar group visited over 70 new residential construction objects in the Federal Republic of Germany and the famous INTERBAU exhibition in West Berlin. Architects brought back a pile of documents, catalogues, building standards, filmed materials, over 1000 photos, and also preliminary contracts signed for the acquisition of industrial lines, especially of chemicals, and new construction materials containing new ingredients. It is interesting that they were obliged to publish this material. In 1959, a book in Russian – *Residential Housing in Foreign Countries* was published together with many other publications. Even an instructional film was screened for Soviet construction workers; appropriate directives sent to the Councils of Ministers of every republic, and also reached the architects' unions. As Vaidas put it earlier, if the Soviets decided to make a turn, it was made very clearly compulsory to everybody.

Indeed, a major part of the collected material during such foreign trips was successfully, and sometimes even to such an extreme extent, and consistency applied in the Soviet urbanism. First of all they renounced the perimeter planning of houses within a block, free planning was implemented instead with a preservation of natural terrain and landscape arrangement, which had especially fascinated the architects in Germany. Green zones inserted between houses and streets; one or two-storey buildings of household services and shops were constructed in the centre of a residential district, although earlier such facilities were mostly developed on the ground floors of residential blocks. There were



From the report to the Council of Ministries of the USSR "About the Soviet delegation's study trips to Scandinavia and German Federal Republic in the field of residential construction", 1958, in: LLMA, f. 87, ap. 1, b. 227, l. 24

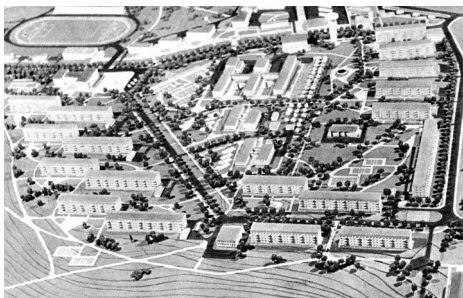


System of the Soviet city: 1. group of houses (2000 residents), 2. micro-rayon (6000–10 000 residents), 3. residential area (25 000–50 000 residents), 4. a city", in: J. Minkevičius, *Miestai vakar, šiandien, rytoj*, Vilnius, 1964

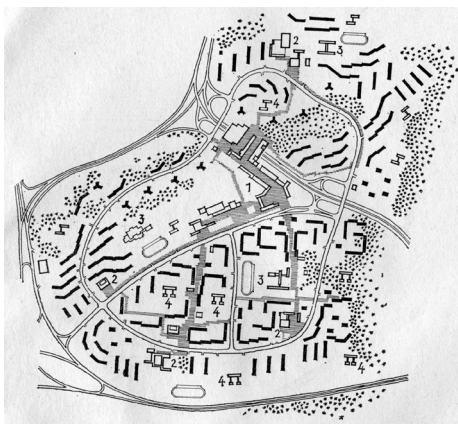


many such small details, for example, the reduced ceiling height to 2.5m in residential flats. This experience was taken as extremely progressive from Scandinavia. As in many other areas, while implementing such economic solutions from the West, Soviet architects were able to demonstrate even more “economic” living standards. For example, if in the West the most optimal multi-storey accommodation, still not requiring an elevator, was considered a 4-storey accommodation, and these facts were stated in some trip reports, but in the Soviet Union they added one more storey – just for the sake of economy. Soviet architects were fascinated by the idea that in Scandinavia the basements of the residential houses contained storerooms instead of bomb shelters. This idea was cautiously suggested in Soviet residential architecture.

So, the end of the 1950s witnessed a certain Soviet residential breakthrough, with the compulsory development of a *microrayon* (the smallest residential district) in the Soviet urbanism. In order to answer the question of why Soviet architects were so fascinated by such an urban development model we have to look more closely to the general ideology of modernism as the ideology of progress. Urban growth and urban citizens were seen as constantly growing and developing structures, but not vice versa. The structure of a *microrayon* allowed the multiplying of it as many times as was needed, and to expand cities almost without any limits. I will use the example of the application of the *microrayon* concept in Lithuania, showing the difference between the things that had been officially declared and the actual residential building practice.



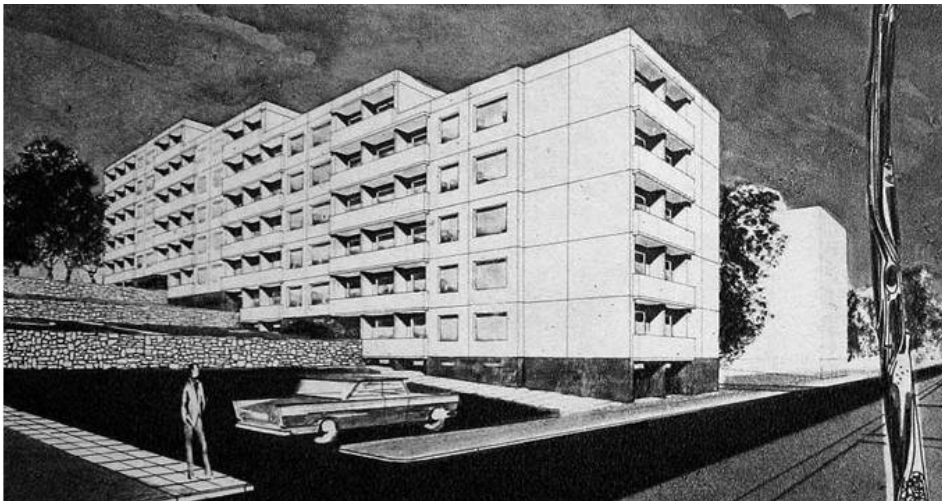
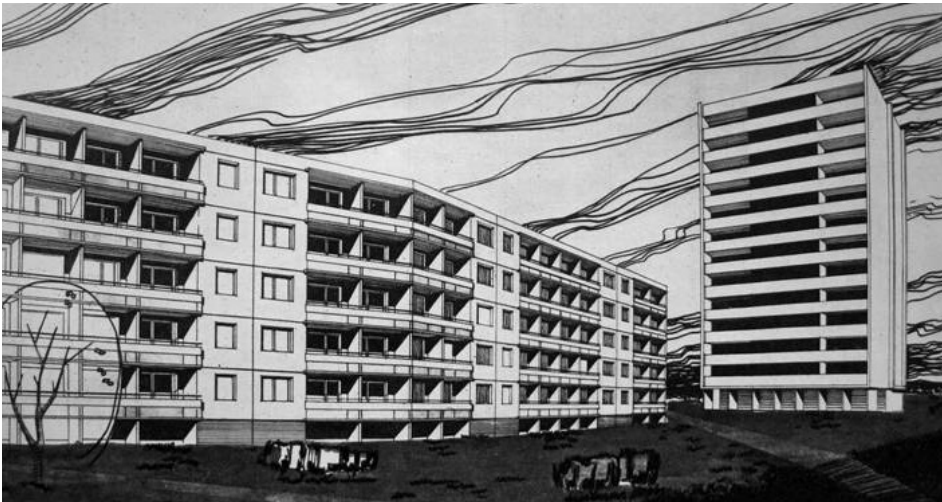
Model of Elektrėnai town, 1960



Master plan of Lazdynai residential district, 1969

The first newly built socialist town of the 1960s in Lithuania was Elektrenai. It was built in a completely new place and the urban planning was realized ‘correctly’. The household service, school, and shop buildings were placed in the centre of the microrayon. Then freely arranged residential houses stood around the centre surrounded first of all by circuit streets, then merging into the Vilnius – Kaunas highway. One can notice the Lithuanian architects’ reflections of their Scandinavian experience, as it was not a secret that their first trips to Finland, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, France had had a tremendous influence on them. Therefore, afterwards the Lithuanian school was referred to as “the inner abroad (foreign area) of the USSR”.

While making such references to the West, we should look at the Lazdynai residential district – as it is the most important site of Lithuanian modernist urbanism where architects used Western, not Moscow models. Designers clearly declared the influence of French, Swedish, and Finnish urban planning, especially empha-

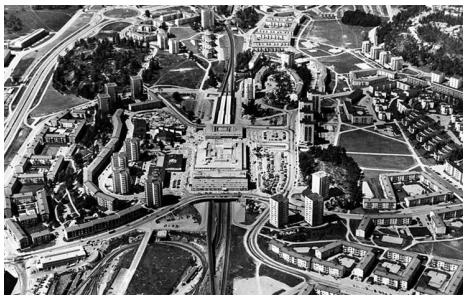
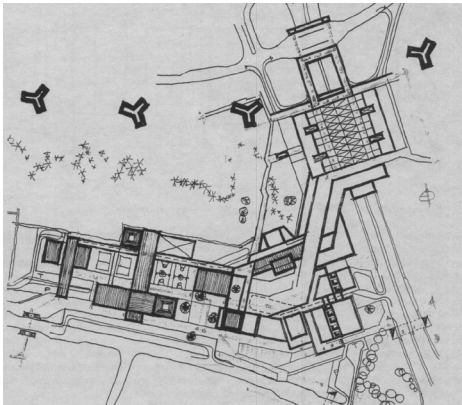


Standard series 1-464 five storey house and experimental designs for the series 1-464-LI (architects Krūminis, Sargelis, Umbrasas and structural engineer Zubrus, 1962), in: *Vilniaus namų statybos kombinatas*, 1969

sizing Toulouse Le Mirail, designed by George Candilis, Tapiola in Helsinki, as well as the Vällingby and Farsta suburbs in Stockholm, Sweden. As we can see, everything was implemented precisely and consistently. For example, the entire district, which was comprised of 4 *microrayons*, was built in the hilly terrain with lots of greenery and pine trees, surrounded by the circle road, while within the district pedestrian paths were designed. Each microrayon had its own local shopping centre, a school, and a couple of kindergartens all surrounded by 5, 9 or 12 storey standard houses.

Another step forward by Lithuanian architects was called 'over-





Design for the commercial and leisure center for Lazdynai, architect Česlovas Mazūras, 1966 (not realized) and almost similar district center in Vällingby, 1953, in: H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, New York, 1968



Lazdynai on the cover of Werner Rietdorf's book about new socialist housing districts, published in 1976

coming the standard Soviet five-storey residential block', which, for good reason become known as "the brick", as it was one of the most monotonous edifice. Innovations were very moderately applied in Lazdynai and, of course, were met with tremendous enthusiasm and considered as a great event in the Soviet residential design. I am talking about the terrace-like 5 and 9 storey buildings, those of broken configuration and the twelve-storey tower blocks. The biggest obstacle while implementing those new house designs was the approval of the designs by the producer at the Industrial Enterprise of Housing Construction. Directors of such enterprises were stagnant, and according to many architects of the time, only with the help of informal relationships was it possible to persuade them to launch innovation in the production line.

Planning and, of course, construction of the buildings were always implemented with some delays. Talking about Lazdynai, there was one special solution that was planned but never realized. It was the main commercial and leisure centre, which was innovatively designed above the highway (compared to the similar district centre built over the subway line in Vällingby). According to the architect, the reason for the failure was the usual one – lack of funds. Although approved with delays and huge criticism due to its innovative solutions, Lazdynai was not only implemented, but also eventually awarded with the Lenin prize in 1974. It was the first award of such high rank granted to an residential area design in the Soviet Union. Lazdynai not only became the epitome of the Soviet urban planning, but also an example for the entire socialist bloc.

One can discern a number of paradoxes in this story. First, Lazdynai, which had been designed as an opposition to the Soviet drabness and dullness, in an attempt to introduce western ideas, eventually became not only an acknowledged example, but also a skilfully used instrument for propaganda, presenting the achievements of modern Soviet urban planning. Second, in Soviet times Lazdynai used to symbolize for many the spirit of western modernism and a chance for better housing architecture. However, today Lazdynai is just one more Soviet-style residential rayon standing in confirmation of the omnipresent industrialized prefabricated construction. So, I would like to conclude my presentation with a question: if we compare a Swedish block of flats with a Lithuanian one, or the planning of the residential areas, we do not see many differences, but why then are the prefabricated residential districts widely considered attributes of the socialist world?

The similarities between the postwar residential housing construction in the East and West may be explained by their similar

needs and similar technologies. But those similarities end with the external resemblance of the houses themselves, their types and location within the residential area. When we, and for a good reason, ascribe those prefabricated blocks of flats to the gloomy Soviet legacy, we first of all refer to their number and monotonous uniformity.

What do I have in mind?

If mass housing construction in the West was mere an experiment, with many different systems and types being used, I mean the prefabricated ones, then Soviet industrialized construction was of a single type and irreversible in the entire socialist block. Once they launched a line, it was used forever, up until the fall of communism in the 1990s. Therefore, the stability and irreplaceability of the doctrine should be considered its most exceptional feature, even more than the building itself. Moreover, as Soviet architects were not restricted by the private ownership of land, they were able to implement their social engineering ideas to much higher extremes and scales than their Western colleagues.

Soviet Lithuanian residential areas became known in the Soviet Union for their compactness, rather small scale, successfully solved terrain and issues of green areas. In contrast to other regions, where, despite all the recommendations to preserve the natural terrain, the construction sites used to be flattened to make them more convenient for the construction machinery, terrains in Lithuania were preserved in their natural form. This proves that Lithuanian architects and engineers were working really hard to provide at least a little dignity to those standard Soviet barracks. But still, what was mostly designed and built as social housing in the West, became the absolutely prevailing residential space for everyone in the Soviet bloc. Therefore, this legacy should primarily be related to the totalitarian state regime. Its tragedy lies not in a low-quality block of flats as such, nor in the unappealing façade, but in the social level, as the standard and the only one possible residential environment, to which a Soviet citizen practically had no alternatives.



Lazdynai in 2012.

Photo: Marija Drėmaite