

## Manifestations of Politics in Lithuanian Architecture: Examples of Architectural Dehumanisation during the Transition from a Soviet to a Post-Soviet Society

**Key words:** Soviet architectural heritage, ideology, abandoned places, functional typology.

During practically the entire development of Lithuanian architecture in the 20th century, one can observe open architectural politicisation as being one of the most important ideological ways of giving meaning to space. Themes of national romanticism that were exploited during the interwar period were followed by a feverish attempt during the Soviet period to create a “socialist city”, and replaced by subsequent variants enabling the search for a national identity within the “union of nations”. These tendencies may be associated both with the peripeteia of politics, and the principled disposition – especially with reference to the modern movement – of architecture in the 20th century, or to open politicisation. At the turn of the 21st century, however, one finds an inclination to erase the more distinguishing ideological boundaries. In architecture, the direct and unambiguous examples that give a political sense to space, and that are demonstrated in an explicit manner, are replaced by multifaceted phenomena manifesting themselves via secondary (latent) subsequences. The urbanistic texture of a city/town is transformed by encompassing ideas and interests that are obviously even contradictory in the sense of their ideological meaning.

One of the controversial links between ideology and a spatial environment is manifest in an assessment of the architecture developed in the Soviet period, and its destiny in the post-Soviet world. Although the theme of this article is related to this issue, I will focus on the anti-ideological nature of the architec-

ture that influenced the corrosion of ideology-based spaces created during the Soviet period in a post-Soviet city/town, rather than on the architectural ideology of the Soviet period.

This topic also features an important practical aspect. The major part of the heritage of the latter half of the 20th century is in danger of disappearing entirely, thus leaving an empty space between historical and modern architecture. In most cases, post-Soviet society has failed to harmoniously adapt the heritage of the past era. A typical phenomenon happens when an urban structure developed several decades ago exists in parallel with a new one, for the spaces they occupy hardly have the appearance of interconnecting vessels. Places that had great social and symbolic impact in the past gradually lose their meaning, and instead of being adapted to a new city/



Fig. 1. A detail of semi-desolated housing in Didžiasalis borough. Photo by the author, 2006



Fig. 2. Uncompleted hotel in Kaunas. Photo by the author, 2004

town, also lose their physical appearance. According to Arnold Toynbee, what we are witnessing is the *defacement* process of a modern city/town.<sup>1</sup> Part of the problem in this case undoubtedly lies in the quality of construction and changes in ownership, but it is also related to the deep discrepancy between the two eras. In this case, disharmony regarding urban development is the direct outcome of political transformations.

#### POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND PUBLIC SPACES

By forming a specific, functional-spatial structure out of a built environment, any political system seeks to give itself meaning, to encourage its own prosperity via architectural and urbanistic tools. In order to reveal the particular form of political impact on a given space, we shall first define the manner of investigating the spread of this aspect. According to Margaret Kohn, local social meaning and sense should be perceived not only via text – because, as Henri Lefebvre emphasises, “the semiological categories of message, code, reading and writing can only capture part of the meaning

of space” – but also via three interconnected levels of analysis. Space may be analysed “as a dimension of experience and perception (phenomenal); as a mechanism for facilitating interaction and forging collective identities (social); and as repositories of condensed meanings (symbolic)”<sup>2</sup> An analysis of public spaces during the Soviet period permits one to generalise that the (political) meaning is, in this case, doubly accentuated: directly – as a symbolic and multilayered structure of content (especially visible in memorial monuments and squares, representational objects, etc.<sup>3</sup>), and indirectly – as spaces whose main goal is the construction of *social welfare* places. If in the first case objects in the urban structure are symbolic and openly textual, then the supposed social welfare space is related, both in its formal shape and spatially modelled form, to everyday life and behaviour.

In the post-Soviet period, a large portion of the easily replaceable symbols of the previous regime were removed, and representational edifices were tailored – after the adaptation of one or another direct political message – to represent another political system. Socially isolated, these are the forms of daily “constructed happiness”<sup>4</sup> that became the most damaged urban spaces. There is a kind of paradox here. The prevailing opinion regarding architecture from the Soviet period is that only socialist realism architecture can be treated as Soviet architecture – thereby giving it a certain political shading. The most telling examples of this are the high-rise buildings from the Stalin period. Everything that was created later was a “natural prolongation of Lithuanian architecture”<sup>5</sup> However, once the political situation changed, there was a notable erosion primarily in the modernistic city/town. Hence, those spaces that initially seemed politically uncharged must be reconsidered via the prism of a change in the political situation. One can consider these buildings as being one of the most important manifestations of latent politicisation. Thus, the individual functional type of architecture that has a tendency to become a “cultural/political ruin” reveals the ideology of the past epoch no less effectively than the representational sculptures on the Žalasis Bridge (Green Bridge) in Vilnius, or the uncompleted project of a socialist realism skyscraper.

In attempting to take a closer look at this peculiar strand representing the link between architecture and politics which unfolded during the post-Soviet period, one may begin to assume that *a connection between functional typology and social behaviour* is one of the most significant aspects in endeavouring to understand the links between architecture and society. This social behaviour is the indicator that enables one to name the influence of the general sociocultural phenomena on the peculiarities of architectural edifices. As “each individual has a variety of competencies in dealing with different aspects of the building environment (some of which are physiological and some social cultural)”<sup>6</sup>, it may be said that the specificity of the relationship between architecture and social behaviour manifests itself particularly in how a person living here adapts to the behaviour models dictated by the existing architectural environment. On the other hand, models of typology and social behaviour are also defined by an inverse link, i.e. not by the manner in which an architectural environment impacts on a person, but by the manner in which a person (society) impacts

on the development of an existing architectural environment. This is the change in public behaviour models that may largely account for the erosion of architectural spaces from the Soviet period in a post-Soviet city/town. This would mean that, in one way or another, architecture in the Soviet Union was developed as an assumption for ideologically programmed social activity. Naturally, this situation also formed certain typical forms of behaviour in space, and of behaviour with space. However, it is also natural that, after radical cultural and political changes, these buildings were left to exist without their usual social meaning. Losing touch with a social environment results in the dehumanisation of spaces accompanying political collapse. Here, architecture becomes a cultural-political representation instrument and is relevant inasmuch as the ideas represented are relevant.

In this problematic medium it is important to distinguish two groups that differ both in their scale, and in the intensity of their political symbolism: representational architecture, and public spaces



Fig. 3. Eduardas Chlomauskas, Jonas Kriukelis, *The Sports Palace in Vilnius*, 1971. Photo by the author, 2004



providing everyday life in an architectural background. The following examples reflect only part of the everyday use of the public edifices that dominated the Soviet cityscape. This part of the architectural environment was aesthetically fairly modest, and thus the social-cultural effect of these buildings is not initially as strong visually, as is, for example, the decorative, neo-classicist architectural language of socialist realism. The overall effect of these public spaces is, however, no less important, in terms of the spatial vitality and harmony of the city, than its individual unique structures. Its social impact is also equally significant.

Nevertheless, we shall consider the fact that almost every one of these building types contains examples of portions of the edifice losing significance, and being abandoned or incompletely after the political system changed. In a post-Soviet environment, one can find buildings of various scale and function having the same symptomatology of spatial regression. The borough of Didžiasalis is a telling example of urbanistic affliction. Following the collapse of the political system and the breakdown of economic relations, Didžiasalis, like other spaces of an indus-



Fig. 4. Foodstuff shop in Molėtai. Photo by the author, 2006

trial nature, became a phantom town [fig. 1]. A great range of unfinished hotels, whose construction was initiated with tourists (for whom the Baltic States were one of the most attractive spaces in the Soviet camp) to the Soviet Union in mind, can also be considered a consequence of the collapse of the political system [fig. 2]. Certain representational edifices – the Sports Palace in Vilnius for one – also became architectural ruins [fig. 3]. Thus the two characteristic types of public space that are given as an illustration of political change are just a component of a broader phenomenon.

### SHOPPING SPACES

One of the most important types of public space characteristic of the Soviet period which was also the most open to society was the so-called *shopping centre and household service facility*. This edifice was both widely accessible, and made up a considerable part of the background of daily public life. At the same time, it is one of the public spaces that experienced the most radical changes. For example, while schools and kindergartens, which were also an integral part of the Soviet cityscape, were more or less adapted for continued existence, shopping spaces perhaps best depict the formation of two parallel types of public space in the post-Soviet urban transformation.

The most obvious assumption in terms of latent politicisation is the fact that numerous shop buildings were arranged methodically according to a so-called *stepped service system*, the implementation of which began in the early 1960s. A certain sequence based on sociological research and the geometric radius principle was introduced to the construction process of shopping centres and other household service facilities. Although the development of public centres in the 1970s turned from the strict planning typical of the spirit of the Athens Charter to a more flexible creation of polyfunctional edifices, the chain of shops divided into purveyors of specific goods (household goods, foodstuffs, etc.) remained one of the most characteristic attributes of the system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this strictly organised system also broke down. Some buildings

were abandoned, while others lost their seamless appearance and architectural features due to a chaotic turnover of owners, advertising panels, and interior renovations. The massive conversion of shops at the turning-point of the epochs became an illustration par excellence of former and new urban structures existing as if in parallel within one of the spheres of public life.

The most typical illustrations of this phenomenon are the abandoned shop buildings in the smaller towns and villages in Lithuania: Molėtai, Ukmergė, Dūkštas, Telšiai, etc. After the passing of the centralised trade system, when only one or two shops sold foodstuffs [fig. 4] or hardware, these spaces lost their social logistics. As if illustrating the collapsed epoch, even those public buildings that were located in the main streets or town squares were not used for many years during the transitional period.

Representational urban shops can, however, be considered from a different angle. Starting with the construction industrialisation period of the 1970s, nearly all shop buildings were dominated by the aesthetic

of functionalism. Apartment and public buildings, mostly grey in colour, formed a rather monotonous cityscape. Once these problems became apparent<sup>7</sup>, efforts were made to develop shop buildings according to individual projects. Thus, in spite of the existing stepped service system, the 1980s witnessed the introduction of shopping and daily service centres featuring an absolutely new quality (both in terms of functional and architectural solutions), and integrating a new range of functions. The discovered solutions offered a peculiar alternative both for split-level modern functionalist buildings, and for the large covered shopping centre “boxes” that blossomed in the West. Daring steps were taken beyond the limits of utilitarian purposefulness, and some of these edifices even acquired touches of a luxurious, slightly manneristic style of architecture.

Despite the aforementioned positive moments, the change in conditions led to the fact that structures of seamless and frequently even original architecture were damaged by the promotional and visual chaos that resulted from fragmented ownership. An



Fig. 5. Kęstutis Pempė, Gytis Ramūnis, shopping centre Šeškinė in Vilnius, 1985. Photo by the author, 2005

exemplary situation arose at the *Šeškinė* shopping centre in Vilnius, which was constructed in 1985 according to a project by famous Lithuanian architects Kęstutis Pempė, Gytis Ramūnis, and others. The complex was developed in keeping with the style of the historic commercial square. However, barely a decade later, this space was also left unmanaged and semi-abandoned [fig. 5]. Having lost its original social conditions, the unique architectural structure was enveloped by a space that was forming along the principle of freely stretching wood paths – by a site which had lost its planned spatial concept. This is a typical example, and is repeated in many different versions of the shopping edifices of the period.

#### CULTURE AND LEISURE BUILDINGS

Another important functional type related to the ideological aspects of the Soviet period is architecture intended for cultural and leisure needs. An inherently representational function of these buildings per se offered an impulse to assign them a political meaning: “favourable attitude of society towards architectural projects with such a purpose; their openness, an attractive functioning nature and noncommittal meaningfulness ... are considered an effective instrument to represent politics, in this case cultural politics”.<sup>8</sup> This aspect is primarily assigned to representational structures like theatres, museums, libraries, etc., which, with certain exclusions<sup>9</sup>, remained functional despite the political situation. These are not discussed in this article, since their representativeness and politicisation is perhaps more of a textual, symbolic, surface nature.

Leisure models are, however, closely connected with daily social activities. In the process of an analysis dealing with reasons for certain architectural developments during the transformation period, it is very important to consider the evident principled difference between societies in the West and in the Soviet Union. In the former Soviet Union, the driving force stimulating the creation of public spaces derived not from a consumer society but from the official organisation of mass leisure as developed according to the goals of the Soviet system. Instead of being a natural social process it became a more



Fig. 6. Povilas Adomaitis, cultural centre in Mindūnai, 1979. Photo by the author, 2006

political one. Meanwhile, according to Peter Davey and many other theoreticians, in Western societies in the latter half of the 20th century, “leisure has been reduced to consumption”<sup>10</sup> – a phenomenon that is very apparent in architectural spaces.<sup>11</sup> In the Soviet Union, the establishment of one or another institution, and the formation of the characteristic structure of the public cultural space were actually based not on the real needs of society (though this may be simplified in terms of the stereotyped spaces of popular culture), but on certain visions of a socialist lifestyle.

The most telling spatial expression of socialist leisure planning was *the cultural centre*. In the provinces, buildings of this functional typology acquired particular meaning: these buildings represented an effort to replace the church – a public space that had prevailed in the smaller towns since olden times. They also had to become the focal point of a social life, no matter how meager that might be. If we follow the generalised assumption that a Western city developed as a field of continuous stress between two poles, i.e. sacrality and secularity, we will see that by the mid-20th century, there also was a balance between a sacral space (church) and a secular public space (pub, shop, etc.) in the smaller towns. Therefore, the striving to push away the *sacrum* space to the margins, and to replace it by a secular cultural centre, may be considered a particularly strong manifestation of the political ideology of the Soviet period. The fact that this aspect was played out directly in a daily space is also important.



However, even in the Soviet period, the acceptance of cultural centres as significant public places intended for community meetings was very difficult – despite the fact that in individual cases original architectural and urbanistic solutions were applied in order to create these new centres of attraction. Soviet ideologists soon recognised that “people usually go to, and communicate in, shops and household service facilities – not cultural centres”.<sup>12</sup> This remark points to the obvious lack of conformity between ideological goals, and society’s real expectations. It is natural that the change of epochs, accompanied by the loss of ideological meaning, also determined the decay of the physical appearance of the cultural centres. The Mindūnai cultural centre offers a most illustrative example: in Soviet architectural propaganda, this centre was often referred to as “a prosperous example of a Soviet collective farm (kolkhoz)” – it was completely abandoned [fig. 6] barely a decade later. The political-ideological basis of the problem is emphasised by the contrast between the decaying cultural centre, and a nicely maintained sacral space in the borough of Želva. These are just a few examples of many, where the latent impact of the Soviet epoch is felt symptomatically. It should also be remembered that in the majority of cases, there were more cultural centres than any other building designed for cultural needs, that the former lacked symbolic content and had no architectural value, and that once the social tasks designated to them lost their ideological lining, they obviously lost all meaning.<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In assessing a major portion of the architecture of the Soviet period, we acknowledge that only the most general and most telling examples of an ideology, articulated in the simplest way (high-rise buildings from the Stalinist period, monumental art, etc.), might be related to a geometry of forms and aesthetic expression. However, after delving into the typological peculiarities and transformations of public architecture, we soon recognise that some functional types also illustrate the prevailing ideology of the political system. Therefore, whilst analysing manifestations of politicisation in architecture,

there should be a greater focus not only on easily replaceable symbolic décor, but also on the strength of the link between semantic meaning and physical appearance. Examples in the presentation of dissonant spaces illustrate the tight link between political and spatial structures.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *Cities of Destiny*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Kohn, ‘The Power of Place: the House of the People as Counterpublic’, in: *Polity*, vol. 33, issue 4, 2001, p. 503

<sup>3</sup> When talking about regime symbols in a city/town, Sigurd Grava discerns the following: “Ubiquitous slogans which occupied pride of place in Soviet cities, much as commercial advertising does in Western cities; urban geography (naming and un-naming of cities, districts, institutions, facilities, and streets after major political personages or events); large ceremonial spaces with heroic statuary that the Soviet regime created (Red Square in Moscow as the prototype); tall wedding-cake style buildings erected during Stalin’s period as instant landmarks symbolising the power of the regime”. See Sigurd Grava, ‘The Urban Heritage of the Soviet Regime: the Case of Riga, Latvia’, in: *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 59, issue 1, 1993, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Mart Kalm, Ingrid Ruudi (eds.), *Constructed Happiness: Domestic Environment in the Cold War Era*, Estonian Academy of Arts Proceedings, 16, Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Lithuanian architect Algimantas Nasvytis, February 24, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Lang, *Creating Architectural Theory: The Role of Behavioural Sciences in Environmental Design*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987, p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> The problems are discussed in the press of that time: Vytautas Balčiūnas, ‘Apie gyventojų aptarnavimo sistemas ir kompleksus’ (‘On Resident Service Systems and Complexes’) in: *Statyba ir architektūra*, no. 2, 1974, p. 2, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Rimantas Buivydas, ‘XX a. reprezentacinė architektūra: pro ir contra’ (‘Representational Architecture of the 20th C.: pro and contra’), in: *Urbanistika ir architektūra*, no. 3, 2001, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> For example, after the Soviet period, the public lost interest in the Revolution Museum in Vilnius, and it was abandoned for some time.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Davey, ‘Environment and the Potential of the Individual’, in: *Modernity and Popular Culture: the 3rd International A. Aalto Symposium*, Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1988, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> The most telling example of this phenomenon is the architecture of Las Vegas, theoretically generalised in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT press, 1972.

<sup>12</sup> Algimantas Liekis, 'Prekybos ir buities centrai kaime' ('Shopping and Household Service Centres in the Countryside'), in: *Statyba ir architektūra*, no. 11, 1979, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Here it should be taken into account that social-func-

tional futility was also emphasised by recent demographical changes. These changes serve as an important assumption that beyond the safe and well-groomed world of the capital city and other major centres, are the indigent spaces of the provincial towns and boroughs.

**Vaidas Petrulis**

*Kauno technologijos universiteto Architektūros ir statybos institutas*

## **Politikos apraiškos Lietuvos architektūroje: architektūros dehumanizavimo atvejai pereinant iš sovietinės į posovietinę visuomenę**

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** sovietinės architektūros paveldas, ideologija, apleistos erdvės, funkcinė tipologija.

### **Santrauka**

XX amžiui būdingą tiesioginę ir eksplicitiškai demonstruojamą erdvės politinio įprasminimo sampratą pastaraisiais dešimtmečiais keičia daugiabriauniai, antrinėmis (latentinėmis) prasmėmis atsiskleidžiantys architektūros ir ideologijų ryšiai. Viena iš kontraversiškesnių ideologijos ir erdvinės aplinkos interpretacijų posovietinėje Lietuvoje yra susijusi su sovietmečiu sukurtos architektūros vertinimu ir likimu. Akivaizdu, kad dažnai nerandama būdų, kaip harmoningai adaptuoti praėjusios epochos palikimą. Straipsnyje daroma prielaida, kad spartus XX a. antrosios pusės architektūros nykimas iš dalies yra sąlygotas staiga prarastos socialinės reikšmės, kuri buvo konstruota ideologiniu pagrindu. Tekste plačiau aptarti du būdingi šias tendencijas iliustruojantys viešosios erdvės tipai: prekybos pastatai ir mažesniųjų miestelių kultūros namai.

Straipsnyje akcentuojama, kad su formų geometrija ir menine raiška siejamas architektūros ideologiškumas yra paviršutiniškas, labiau tekstinio, simbolinio pobūdžio. Tad analizuojant politiškumo apraiškas architektūroje dėmesys kreiptinas ne tik į lengvai pakeičiamą simbolinį dekorą, bet ir į semantinės reikšmės bei fizinio pavidalo sąsajos glaudumą. Šias politinės santvarkos ideologijos ir erdvinės sąrangos sandūras iliustruoja pateikiami nedarnių erdvių atvejai.

*Gauta: 2007 03 18*

*Parengta spaudai: 2007 10 08*