# From Construction to Deconstruction.
# The Heritage of Post-War Modern Mass Housing

*Nicola Belli\*, Kaunas University of Technology, Kaunas, Lithuania*

*Abstract* – The aim of the study is to find out to what extent dominant ideologies of post-war decades shaped modern mass housing and to engage a discussion about potential heritage of the phenomenon. Analysis is based on the district of Lazdynai (Vilnius). The paper is committed to demonstrate that transition, considered by Tunbridge & Ashworth as a factor of dissonance in heritage, made messages and meanings embedded in mass housing obsolete, and in some cases even undesirable.

*Keywords* – Dissonant heritage, Landscape, Lithuania, Heritage, Mass housing, Modernism, Post-socialist city, Transition.

## Introduction

The Soviet Revolution in architecture began in 1954, with Khrushchev's reforms, which aimed to make the process of construction 'faster and cheaper' and to make supply of housing more efficient. In the same years, the first examples of modern mass housing were already taking shape in countries such as France and Sweden. Years between the 1950s and 1980s can be considered the golden age of mass housing in Europe. Therefore, almost seventy years after the phenomenon had been introduced and more than three decades since the end of the construction peak, it makes sense to start thinking about the legacy of post-war modern mass housing. Moving from the centrality of ideologies in construction of landscape and in the definition of memory within a society, the work is aimed at analysing the physical and mental construction and the so-far mental deconstruction of mass housing. Therefore, the paper is committed to the following:

- to understand how modern mass housing was shaped by dominant ideologies of post-war decades;
- to engage a discussion about potential heritage of mass housing.

The district of Lazdynai, completed in Vilnius in 1973, provides evidence necessary to give empirical validity to the work.

Before starting analysis and discussion it is necessary to motivate the geographical criterium of the work and the selection of Lazdynai. In theoretical and historical overview of mass housing the work adopts a 'European' perspective, beyond the typical east-west dichotomy of post-war Europe. Such a 'continental' approach does not intend to ignore differences between blocs or single states. On the other hand, it follows the assumption that relatively similar historical conditions and shared theoretical references inspired planning and construction of mass housing in different political regimes. A series of factors make Lazdynai a suitable case. To begin with, despite standardization of Soviet modernism, planners managed to create an improved built environment and to adapt construction to local context. Therefore, in the field of Soviet modernism, Lazdynai is architecturally relevant. Furthermore, the district has been celebrated both locally

and internationally, and perfectly represented optimistic narration of post-war mass housing. Finally, Lazdynai is currently facing important questions related to its role in contemporary context and its heritage.

The first part of the paper is aimed at providing a solid theoretical background on the centrality of ideologies in the construction of landscape, in the definition of paradigm of memory and forgetting and in the creation of heritage. Moreover, the dynamicity of ideology and the consequences of ideological shift for landscape, memory and heritage are analysed. The second part of the work concentrates on the specific context of post-war mass housing. It is, therefore, aimed at demonstrating to what extent mass housing was shaped by specific historical conditions, political goals and architectural theories. In the end, the potential heritage of mass housing is analysed. In particular, moving from the concept of dissonant heritage introduced by Tunbridge & Ashworth, the paper focuses on the consequences of transition on post-war modern neighbourhoods, analysing the situation of Lazdynai.

## I. Literature Review

The active involvement of ideology and power in landscape formation and interpretation has been widely studied in last years. In the field of cultural geography, as demonstrated by Peter Jackson [1], practical aspects of ideology have been underlined since the end of the 1980s. Humphrey [2], Czepczyński [3] and Czepczyński & Soováli-Sepping [4] followed the trend and demonstrated that ideologies do have a material dimension and that landscape represents them. Tamm [5] deeply investigated the issue of cultural memory. He focused on the work of Juri Lotman and Boris Uspensky and analysed the theme of mnemo-history [6]. Tunbridge & Ashworth [7], Graham & Howard [8] and Harvey [9] provided a very relevant analysis of the concept of heritage and how it interacts with landscape.

Historians such as Bessel [10], Buchanan [11] and Judt [12], in their reconstructions of post-war Europe, presented political, demographic, economic and social trends that fostered urbanization and, consequently, mass housing. The issue of mass housing has been investigated by a relevant amount of studies in the last years. Wassenberg [13], Wassenberg, Turkington & van Kempen [14], Hess, Tammaru & van Ham [15] recently provided excellent overviews of mass housing and analysed the phenomenon mostly from an architectural and urban point of view. Swenarton, Avermaete and van Heuvel [16] studied the role of welfare in architecture. The phenomenon of mass housing, due to its geographical expansion, fostered a deep debate among scholars stressing specificities and those who presented similarities between different areas. Recently, specificities of socialist

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mass housing have been presented by Sammartino [17] and Zarecor [18]. On the other hand, Borén & Gentile [19], Glendinning [20], Reid [21], Monclús & Díez Medina [22] and Urban [23], without ignoring local peculiarities, put the accent on inter-bloc similarities.

Kattago [24] and Golubchikov [25] described post-Soviet transition and its spatialization. The theme of post-socialist transition and its effects on the city have been analysed, among others, also by Borén & Gentile [19], Gentile & Sjöberg [26], Kip & Sgibnev [27], Young & Kaczmarek [28] and Musil [29]. Efforts of local scholars in the field of architectural history made it possible to study the construction of post-war mass housing in Lithuania and to start a discussion about its potential heritage [30], [31].

## II. Landscape and Heritage: How Ideologies Construct, Remember and Forget

Ideologies actively shape landscape and heritage. The role of power and ideology in formation and interpretation of landscape became a central issue at the end of the 1980s. In his book *Maps of Meaning. An Introduction to Cultural Geography*, Peter Jackson defined ideology as "a system of beliefs that are characteristic of a particular class or group" [1, *50*]. Jackson pointed out that "ideology cannot be confined to the realm of ideas and beliefs, but it is a severely practical domain where ideas and beliefs have definite material consequences" [1, *47*]. Both Jackson and Tunbridge and Ashworth stressed that ideologies are highly selective. Once they become 'dominant' they systematically promote specific meanings and frame interpretations.

The establishment of a rule over landscape is, therefore, a priority for political power. Mariusz Czepczyński claimed that landscape operates "as a representational system" [3, *42*]. Landscape is, in fact, one of the most powerful media to represent ideas, social constructions, and power relations. In her article "Ideology in Infrastructure: Architecture and Soviet Imagination", Caroline Humphrey claimed that "ideology is found not only in texts and speeches; it is a political practice that is also manifest in constructing material objects" [2, *39*]. Nevertheless, to present landscape as an unchangeable and monolithic system would provide a partial and incomplete picture. David Harvey claimed that landscape is characterized by "the notion of 'becoming'" [9, *153*], and that it is constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed.

Due to the dynamic nature of ideologies and systems, the interpretation of landscape and heritage are subject to change. At the end of the 1970s, Juri Lotman and Boris Uspensky, leading figures of the Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics, introduced the concept of cultural memory. The main argument of Lotman and Uspensky was that the past of a given culture does not disappear, but it becomes fixed and acquires a permanent presence in cultural memory. Memory does not exclusively create new texts but also provides new interpretations of the already existing ones. Memory is, therefore, active and dynamic. Within this framework, the process of forgetting must be considered as an integral part of memory. Lotman defined the idea in a more articulated way and introduced a new element in the discussion: the change of paradigm of memory and oblivion.

"Each culture defines its paradigm of what must be remembered (that is, preserved) and what must fall into oblivion. (…) But with the change of time, of the system of cultural codes, the paradigm of memory and oblivion changes, too. That which had been declared 'really existent' may turn out to be 'as though non-existent' and doomed to oblivion, whereas the non-existent may become existent and meaningful" [5, *135*].

It is therefore possible to claim that "the past no longer appears as something final and irreversible but persists in many ways in the present" [6, *1*]. Theoretical debate on the issues of memory and forgetting found one of the main expressions in the trend of 'mnemo-history', which was developed by the German scholar Jan Assmann. Mnemo-history is "concerned not with the past as such but only with the past as it is remembered, and it concentrates exclusively on those aspects of significance and relevance which are the product of memory" [6, *3*]. Inspired by Lotman and Uspensky and by mnemo-historical approach, Mariusz Czepczyński stressed that "what to keep and not to keep is an indicator of social aspirations and desired cultural identities" [3, *54*]. Thus, interpretation of the past within a society is always politically conditioned.

Selective attitude toward the past and its interpretation according to contemporary purposes is typical of the process of heritage creation. Tunbridge and Ashworth defined heritage as "a product of the present, purposefully developed in response to current needs or demands" [7, *6*] and its creation as a process based on choices between what contemporary societies decide to inherit or not. Graham and Howard further analysed the relation between past and heritage.

"The study of heritage does not involve a direct engagement with the study of the past. Instead, the contents, interpretations and representations of the heritage resource are selected according to the demands of the present. (…) It follows, therefore, that heritage is less about tangible material artefacts or other intangible forms of the past than about the meanings placed upon them and the representations which are created from them" [8, *2*].

Sarah McDowell observed that "the state is usually the official arbitrator of public commemoration and, therefore, of national heritage" [32, *40*]. Graham and Howard argued that "the interpretations will vary depending on the situation of the observer in time and space and that it is meaning that gives value (…) to heritage and explains why certain artefacts, traditions and memories have been selected from the near infinity of the past" [8, *2*].

Harvey stressed the necessity of a "dynamic understanding of heritage" [9, *153*]. Memory and heritage discourses within a society may evolve smoothly and be characterized by a general agreement, but it is not always the case. In certain case and certain conditions, in fact, the ways the past is re-collected generates debates or attitudes of rejection. With the aim of explaining those trends, Tunbridge and Ashworth introduced the concept of dissonant heritage. Dissonant heritage has been defined as a peculiar kind of heritage that "involves a discordance or a lack of agreement and consistency" [7, *20*]. According to Tunbridge

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and Ashworth, dissonance in heritage is inevitable and universal. In a system based on selection, inevitably, any heritage belongs to someone and not to someone else, and any process of heritage creation totally or partially 'disinherits' someone. Graham and Howard added that, being shaped and managed in response to the demands of the present, interpretations of heritage are "open to constant revision and change and are also both sources and results of social conflict" [8, *3*].

To summarize, landscape represents dominant ideologies and that paradigm of memory is directly influenced by what societies decide to remember and to forget. Heritage designation is also an outcome of these choices. Construction of landscape and creation of memory and heritage are extremely dynamic processes. Therefore, expectations related to landscape memory and heritage are subject to change.

### III. Post-War Mass Housing: an Outcome of the Relation Between Ideology and Landscape

Relation between ideology and landscape is not an exclusive domain of the most symbolic elements. Dominant ideologies are active in shaping residential architecture, as well. Principles such as Swedish *folkhemmet* (people's home), committed to provide improved living standards and to make the country a good home, as well as Soviet goals to establish a modern life in modern cities demonstrate that power aimed at influencing every aspect of urban life.

Post-war modern mass housing has been implemented in a very peculiar moment of European history. Since the 1950s Europe entered in an era of relative political stability and a "new mood of 'détente' in European affairs" [12, *246*] that allowed both sides of the Iron Curtain to move forward. Following the Marshall Plan, several west European countries were "launched on an unprecedented boom that overturned all previous expectations and consolidated belief in boundless economic growth" [11, *79*]. In parallel, the Soviet Union and satellite states pushed to increase industrial production, not only in central but also in peripheral areas, to meet economic and political needs. Economic development and industrialization provided new opportunities of employment. Consistent shares of those previously employed in agriculture moved to urban areas. At the same time, the countryside lost its social and cultural importance. Tony Judt underlined the desire to escape village life and traditional rural hierarchies, and Bessel claimed that progressively "urban lifestyles became the norm" [10, *146*]. Thus, a massive wave of urbanization began, and it became a challenge for post-war Europe.

Modern urban planning – actively promoted by CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) between 1928 and 1956 and ideally represented by the "Athens Charter" by Le Corbusier – became the apparently perfect tool to overcome post-war urban problems. Centralized planning, standardized and fast construction methods, as well as trust in endless technological process and egalitarian philosophy were enthusiastically adopted by states. Under these circumstances modern mass housing became the ideal

housing of its era and, between the 1950s and 1980s, deeply transformed urban landscape.

In the last two decades the fact that post-war housing estates in eastern and western Europe "had a number of significant aspects in common" [20, *10*] has been increasingly stressed. Thomas Borén and Micheal Gentile argued:

"The differences between the socialist and the western European city are certainly worth emphasizing, but the fact that there were some important similarities between the two is often neglected and should be acknowledged. During the post-war epoch (…) the Western European city was rebuilt and modernized largely through the implementation of modernist ideas, such as those contained in Le Corbusier's projects. Such ideas were often conceived within a socialist ideological context, and they were extensively put into practice in socialist CEE following the mid-1950s dismantling of the Stalinist architectural paradigm of neoclassical grandeur. (…) As a result, the socialist and capitalist European post-war urban peripheries can be remarkably similar, perhaps even more than they were before the advent of socialism in CEE" [19, *97*].

Miles Glendinning argued that mass housing was "part of a general socialist or welfare-state modernisation ethos" [20, *10*]. Daniéle Voldman and Annie Fourcaut draw a parallel between "a shared timeline in the housing crisis's features" [33, *51*] and "a shared timeline in the responses of public powers or in their ability to respond" [33, *51*]. According to Susan Reid:

"In the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev – no less than in the West in the post-war period – the modern home and household consumption associated with it became a key site for the concrete projection of 'tomorrow' and for the construction of the identity of the citizen of that bright future. Housing vividly demonstrated the regime's renewed commitment to realizing the promises of the Revolution on a mass scale and to achieving high living standards for all" [21, *227*.]

Therefore, in the post-war decades, modern urbanism and political power were committed to provide accommodation for increasing urban population, to improve living standards and to construct social harmony.

### IV. Mass Housing in Soviet Lithuania: Construction and Celebration of Lazdynai

Lazdynai was perhaps the most relevant and iconic example of post-war modern urbanization in the Soviet Lithuania. According to continental trends, Lithuanian urban population had a dramatic increase: "in 1970 already 50.2 percent of the Lithuanian population lived in the cities and towns. Vilnius grew at a particularly fast rate. In 1945, the post-war Lithuanian capital had 110 000 inhabitants. By 1959, that number had more than doubled to 236 000, and in 1979 Vilnius was nearly at the half-million inhabitant mark" [31, *158–159*].

The plan of Lazdynai was commissioned to Vytautas Brėdikis and Vytautas E. Čekanauskas in 1962. The district was completed in 1973. Historian of architecture Marija Drėmaitė stressed that the plan of Brėdikis and Čekanauskas was inspired by foreign

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models, such as Tapiola (Finland), Vällinbgy and Farsta (Sweden) and Toulouse-Le-Mirail (France). The natural site of Lazdynai, characterized by hills and forests, was exploited with the aim of providing diversity and originality (Fig. 1). The Standard Design Department of the Vilnius Urban Construction Planning Institute developed fifteen improved versions of the I-464-LI building series. Compared to the average Soviet dwellings, the apartments of Lazdynai included improvements, as well. According to Drėmaitė "the resulting structures were perhaps the most prominent examples of successfully implemented experimental panel housing architecture, and the new building series can be viewed as a breakthrough design that prompted a continuous pursuit of improvements in standardised multi-unit apartment housing" [31, *172*].



Fig. 1. View of the Lazdynai area from the Vilnius TV Tower [Photo: Author of the Article].

Despite innovations and specificities, Lazdynai must not be considered as a unique project. It is very likely, on the other hand, that "local Communist Party leaders viewed the project as a model design" [31, *173*], a pivotal case of Soviet-Lithuanian urbanism. The district was visited by leading figures of the national *Gosstroi* agency. In 1974 Lazdynai received the Lenin Prize for All-Union Architectural Design, the highest Soviet honour given to urban design projects. The international success was reached in 1976 when Lazdynai appeared in the cover of *Neue Wohngebiete sozialistsher Länder*, by Werner Rietdorf, an Eastern Bloc's international survey of modern panel housing construction. The success of Lazdynai repeated and amplified the initial success of another Vilnius' residential district, Žirmūnai. In 1968 the design for the district was awarded the USSR State Prize for mass

housing design. Furthermore, in December 1969 – January 1970 the international architectural magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (Architecture of Today) published a special issue – *Architecture Sovietique* (Soviet Architecture). Žirmūnai, together with the district of Väike-Õismäe in Tallinn, was presented as a case of modern Soviet mass housing in the Baltic republics.

Therefore, Lazdynai "demonstrated the potentially bright future of panel construction" [31, *177*]. Planners proved to be successful in the integration of natural and built environment and in the creation of a safe residential environment that benefited from pedestrian pathways, greenery, well-kept public space and services in a time when Soviet mass housing was already facing criticism for visual monotony and low-quality construction. Moreover, the Lenin Prize and international celebration demonstrated that post-war districts were central in discourses aimed at showcasing the outcomes of Soviet urbanism.

## V. Transition and its Consequences: The Heritage of Mass Housing

Post-war housing is perhaps the most iconic representation in the urban landscape of a peculiar cultural and political mood characterized by intense and apparently perfect relation between political power and modern planning theories. Nevertheless, ideological transition that took place first in western and later in central and eastern Europe between the 1980s and 1990s carried out deep transformations. The end of the golden age of welfare state, on the one hand, and the socialist collapse, on the other, brought about new values and ideological orientations.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of socialist system in the 'satellite states' generated the most tangible case of transition in contemporary Europe. Siobahn Kattago argued that the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of its hegemony over eastern and central Europe should be considered "extremely relevant (…) as ideological narratives unraveled and new, predominantly national and ethnic ones emerged" [24, *8*]. According to Oleg Golubchikov, a starting point to understand the transition is to consider its ideological and totalizing dimension. Transition is "ideological because it is based on particular assumptions and worldviews, particular philosophies of economic and political development" [25, *611*]. Moreover, "it is totalizing because whatever your ideological predisposition you cannot escape it – it is all-encompassing. Indeed, transition has been one inescapable compulsion that has fundamentally transformed the life circumstances of *all people and places in post-socialist societies*" [25, *611*].

Golubchikov stresses another crucial element: the spatialization of transition, its materialization in specific contexts. Cities in transition are not a mere container, but they are crucial in the reproduction mutation and reinterpretation of the new system of values. The socialist city played a key-role in the social contract: it provided citizens quality of life in exchange for labour. After the collapse of the Soviet system, the new societies demanded "new class consciousness – new etiquettes, ethics, and aesthetics, new semiotics for distinguishing social position and status" [25, *619*]. Young and Kaczmarek claimed that "formerly privileged sites

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under socialism, cities are the vanguard of post-socialist transformation" [28, *54*]. In fact, shaping urban space was one of the pillars in the creation of "new forms of society" [28, *53*]. After the collapse of the socialist bloc, transformation involved "a further remaking of place identity (…) to legitimize new political and economic trajectories" [28, *53*]. Whereas institutional transition can be relatively quick, transformation of urban landscape is a slower and more complicated process. In their conceptualization of dissonant heritage Tunbridge and Ashworth included transition among factors that can trigger dissonance.

In post-Soviet Lithuania, on the one hand, iconic modern mass housing districts continued to represent social political and architectural values of post-war decades. On the other hand, contemporary society is characterized by new goals, new official narratives and new expectations. These trends raised questions about potential marginalization of modern districts and their perception. It is, therefore, likely that mass housing is perceived as a bulky architectural manifestation of the past – a paradoxical situation for the outcome of positivist and future-oriented post-war planning. Tunbridge and Ashworth refer to this process as 'obsolete' transmission, which occurs when values of a previous era continue to be projected to societies that are changed and, therefore, expect different messages and meanings.

Furthermore, Tunbridge and Ashworth introduced a second consequence of transition: 'undesirable' transmission. This peculiar kind of transition manifests itself when meanings and messages represent an unwanted and sometimes painful historical period. 'Undesirable' transmission is widely present in countries that had a traumatic recent past and constructed – at least partially – their identity around it. In post-socialist context, mass housing could be perceived as the massive urban representation of the unwanted years of communism. Within this framework, negative features such as greyness, monotony, large-scale and poor public space may be attributed to undemocratic centralized planning.

Marija Dremaitė noted important peculiarities of contemporary Lazdynai that helpdefine the current situation of the district. To begin with, to a casual observer (…) Lazdynai today appears as a typical representation of socialist housing scheme. It is, therefore, clear that – despite optimistic expectations and celebrations – Lazdynai did not age well and it represents the obsolescence of large part of post-war mass housing stock. Furthermore, it must be considered that the initial success of Lazdynai had a paradoxical consequence. Planners designed the neighbourhood under the inspiration of west European and Nordic modernism. They aimed to introduce innovations within the framework of Soviet mass housing and look for a Lithuanian-Baltic way to interpret the phenomenon. Nevertheless, when Lazdynai won the Lenin Prize for All-Union design in 1974, it became an excellent instrument of propaganda. Therefore, a district designed with the task of differentiating from standard housing allowed authorities to celebrate the outcomes of Soviet planning.

Such a situation raises open questions related to the desirability and the perception of what – despite intentions of architects – can be considered a typically Soviet neighbourhood in the context of a capital that is making efforts to change its image.

## Conclusions

The research demonstrated that ideologies have material aspects and actively shape landscape. Moreover, it has been argued that ideas define the paradigm of what must be remembered within a society. Moreover, it emerged that landscape and memory are dynamic and constantly involved in processes of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. Since heritage is based on what contemporary societies decide to inherit, according to values and ideologies of the present, dynamic nature of heritage must be considered, as well. Therefore, it is quite hard to provide definite conclusions about the heritage of post-war modern mass housing. The fact that residential architecture is a living environment, and not simply a monument or a symbolic element of urban landscape, makes any assessment even more challenging. This does not mean that it is impossible to present some very relevant trends.

Within this framework, the concept of dissonant heritage provides useful interpretative keys. According to Tunbridge and Ashworth, transition and its effects have a primary role as factors of dissonance. Transition manifests itself in material contexts, and cities make no exception. While before the collapse of the Soviet Union urban space was one of the main arenas of material and discursive construction of socialism, during the transition cities became media to represent and reproduce new values and ideological orientations. However, transition is not a black / white change, but it is a long and complicated process. In the city complexities are clearly represented. If removal of statues, erasure of political symbols or changing names of streets and squares are the most immediate and visible signs of change, elsewhere in the urban space transition acts in a less immediate but still effective way.

In post-Soviet Lithuania, iconic post-war districts continue to transmit values of the past to societies that have new ideological orientations and to a surrounding landscape that is being shaped by different ideologies. They, therefore, represent what Tunbridge and Ashoworth defined as 'obsolete' transmission. Furthermore, post-war neighbourhoods are generally associated to the Soviet era, a deeply 'unwanted' and contested past in contemporary Lithuania. Therefore, shortcomings and elements of decline of the housing stock are mostly attributed to the Soviet planning. Lazdynai provides excellent evidences of these trends. To begin with, the fact that Lazdynai is connected to 'unwanted' or at least 'uncomfortable' messages must be acknowledged. The neighbourhood became, in fact, an instrument of Soviet propaganda. The Lenin Prize of 1974 demonstrated that the Soviet power gave huge value to mass housing, and it was committed to celebrate its outcomes. Furthermore, despite the fact that planners were aimed at establishing a Lithuanian-Baltic way to interpret post-war modernism by looking for models abroad, and introducing architectural innovations and trying to adapt construction to natural environment, the physical aspect of Lazdynai – worsened by a not-so-good ageing process – typically represents 'obsolete' socialist housing schemes.

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**Nicola Belli** obtained BA degree in History from the University of Trento, Italy, in 2013. He received MA degree in *MIREES* programme – Interdisciplinary research and studies on Eastern Europe, from the University of Bologna, Italy, in 2015. Currently he is a PhD student in History and Theory of Arts with the Kaunas University of Technology. As an early stage researcher and as a doctoral student he participated in international events and conferences. In November 2016, he attended the international scientific conference *Redefining cities in post-Soviet space* at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography of Leipzig, Germany, where he gave presentation "The Post-Soviet City in the Baltic States – Theoretical Headlines". In May 2018, he participated in the *23rd ASN Annual World Convention*, which took place at the Harriman Institute of the Columbia University of New York, where he presented the paper "Memory and Oblivion in the Contemporary Baltic City". In June 2019, he presented the paper "Modern Mass Housing in Lithuania: Anatomy of a Decline?" at the Fourth Annual Tartu Conference on Russian and East European Studies *Communities in Flux: Rethinking Sovereignty and Identity in an Era of Change,* at University of Tartu, Estonia. In November of the same year, he was among the speakers at the International Symposium *Making and shaping things in creative economies. From history to present day* at the Kaunas Faculty of Vilnius University, Lithuania. In December 2020, he published article "Modern urban planning and dissonant heritage: The Case of San Polo" in journal *Art History and Criticism – Meno Istorija ir Kritika*. His main research interests are Soviet history, comparative history of post-war Europe, urban history, heritage studies and cultural geography.

## Contact Data

**Nicola Belli**
E-mail: nicola.belli@ktu.edu