

“Socialist Realism”: Timeline in Lithuania

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Stalinist architecture reached Lithuania during the last stage of “Socialist Realism” – just before the Second World War. However, approximately the one year of the first Soviet occupation (June 1940–June 1941) was a period too short to leave any significant traces on the architectural map of the country. During this year, the Soviet regime first of all focused on the legislation and on institutional changes. Meanwhile, the architectural planning in most cases continued with ideas and principles of Independent Lithuania. A vast majority of active architects and architectural officials were Lithuanian and graduated from interwar Lithuanian or European universities.

Fig. 1: The National Library in Vilnius, 1954–60, architect: V. Anikinas

Abb. 1: Die Nationalbibliothek in Vilnius, 1954–60, Architekt: V. Anikinas



The second phase of “Socialist Realism” begins right after the Second World War. Naturally, this is the period of urban rehabilitation. Thus, architectural developments first of all were inspired not by luxury or political pomp, but rather by simple economic necessities. It should be noted here that for some of the Lithuanian cities such as Klaipėda, Šiauliai and even Vilnius the damage of the Second World War was extremely high. Thus, starting from 1945 and ending approximately in 1950 with such projects as the Cinema “Pergalė” (Victory) or the House for Scientists, which were among the first significant examples of “Socialist Realism”, Lithuania experienced the phase of rebuilding. During that time radical architectural ideas were expressed on whiteboard and in political rhetoric rather than in the urban environment. Probably the best illustration is the plan to renew the central part of Vilnius. Large-scale architectural ambitions were implemented only in isolated fragments. Instead of solid urban fabric, the reconstruction of the city manifested itself in separate points and fragments of street perspectives.

The most significant landmarks of “Socialist Realism” emerged in a relatively short period of time – starting in 1950 and ending in 1960. It is important to note that many housing areas, public buildings, industrial complexes and elements of infrastructure of so called “Socialist Realism” emerged already after the death of Stalin and even after the famous “decree on the elimination of excesses in construction and architecture” in 1955. The National Library, the M. K. Čiurlionis School of Arts, the Cultural Palace of Professional Unions and many other buildings were only completed around 1960. This means that these projects were implemented only partially, usually without rich decoration of “Socialist Realism”. Consequently we can hardly speak of original and authentic manifestations of “Socialist Realism”.

“Socialist Realism”: values

Despite the short period during which it was in use, the style of “Socialist Realism” left a number of important traces in Lithuania. Naturally, most of the representative buildings were concentrated in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Although some major projects such as the Government Palace or the Opera were never built, many realized constructions became important landmarks of the city. The National Library, the Stadium of “Žalgiris”, the “Pergalė” Cinema, the bridge over the river Neris, the House for Scientists, the railway station, Vilnius airport and many other buildings undoubtedly changed the cityscape of Vilnius. Some of the representative examples of this style also emerged in other

▷ Fig. 2: *The House for Scientists in Vilnius, 1948–53, architect: D. Rippa*

▷ Abb. 2: *Das Haus der Wissenschaftler in Vilnius, 1948–53, Architekt: D. Rippa*



▽ Fig. 3: *Bridge over the river Neris in Vilnius, 1948–52, architect: V. Anikin*

▽ Abb. 3: *Brücke über die Neris in Vilnius, 1948–52, Architekt: V. Anikin*





Fig. 4: Mikrorayon Lazdynai in Vilnius, 1968–74, architects: V. E. Čekanauskas, V. Brėdikis and others
Abb. 4: Wohngebiet Lazdynai in Vilnius, 1968–74, Architekten: V. E. Čekanauskas, V. Brėdikis und andere

places of Lithuania. Among the most important should be mentioned Naujoji Akmenė, the new settlement for workers of a cement factory, the “Pergalės” housing complex in Kaunas, housing in the central part of Klaipėda, fragments of Vilnius street in Šiauliai, and others.

However, despite the large number of buildings Lithuanian “Socialist Realism” can be characterised as being quite moderate compared to internationally known examples. It does not manifest itself as being an outstanding illustration of the style. In terms of scale among the most impressive examples are the National Library and the House for Scientists in Vilnius. The National Library (fig. 1) stands near the parliament, a building of late Soviet modernism, but does not dominate, neither from the perspective of representative Gediminas Avenue nor from other angles. Its rather late construction also resulted in a relatively modest décor compared to the original project which was prepared in 1954. The House for Scientists (fig. 2), together with other buildings near the river Nėris, clearly has a more perceptible visual impact in the urban context. Another urban landmark – the House of Culture of Professional Unions – despite its symbolic importance (it stands on Tauras Hill, which at the beginning of the 20th century was meant to be the place for a “National Palace”), was built according to a standard and simplified project and thus does not represent a strong sty-

listic expression of “Socialist Realism”. If we speak of symbolic importance, first of all we have to mention the bridge over the Neris river (fig. 3), the first building of Vilnius airport and cinema “Pergalė”. They distinguish themselves in the Lithuanian context by their rich decorative expression and great number of Soviet symbols.

If we summarise the architectural values of “Socialist Realism”, we have to note first of all that the Stalinist era in Lithuania left us with an important and visually recognizable layer of 20th century architecture. Nevertheless, although society understands “Socialist Realism” as highly dissonant heritage, some of the most important examples are already protected as national monuments on Lithuanian list of heritage. The physical condition and the level of authenticity vary depending on the individual case, but in general the state of these structures is rather good (with some very important exceptions as in the case of the sculptures on the bridge over the river Nėris in Vilnius). Some of them (e. g. the National Library, the railway stations of Vilnius and Kaunas) have been or are currently being renovated. However, when speaking about Lithuanian examples as candidates for a UNESCO World Heritage serial nomination, we have to bear in mind that these examples are only important as local manifestations of “Socialist Realism”, not as internationally recognisable symbolic icons.



Fig. 5: Memorial for the victims of World War II and museum of the 9th fort of Kaunas fortress, 1966–84, architects: G. Baravykas, V. Vielius; sculptor: A. Ambraziūnas

Abb. 5: Denkmal für die Opfer des Zweiten Weltkriegs und Museum des neunten Forts der Festungsanlage von Kaunas, 1966–84, Architekten: G. Baravykas, V. Vielius; Bildhauer: A. Ambraziūnas

Socialist architecture after “Socialist Realism”

Socialism in architecture does not end with “Socialist realism”. Soviet modernism, which is inseparable from Khrushchev’s reforms, from developments of late modernism under the circumstances of Brezhnev stagnation and finally the specific manifestations of postmodernism during Gorbachev’s perestroika – all these processes testify to the different phases of socialist life and naturally to different architecture. In the case of Lithuania the phase of modernism represents a certain peak of Soviet legacy. Thus, when speaking about Soviet-time Lithuanian architecture in the wider context of 20th century heritage, there is no doubt that we have to mention such examples as microrayon of Lazdynai in Vilnius, or the museum and monument of the 9th fort at Kaunas fortress.

Without a doubt Lazdynai are among the most important achievements of Soviet Lithuanian architecture. After 1974, when microrayon for architecture gained the Lenin Prize, Lazdynai became one of the icons of socialist housing. A gentle mix of natural environment and the rich variety of housing types which were made of standard prefabricated el-

ements, created an example of the highest level of architectural standards in socialist housing (fig. 4). Built nearly at the same time as when Pruitt-Igoe was demolished, and modernism announced to be dead, Lazdynai represents the uniqueness of the socialist world. Embodying the hopes of millions of Soviet people and being the landmark of Soviet life in the architectural as well as the cultural sense, Lazdynai gives us a reason why we should think about the nomination for the UNESCO World Heritage List as representative of mass housing in the 20th century (as well as Le Havre, but from the other side of the Iron Curtain).

Another interesting structure of the Soviet world with a lot of political symbolism is the memorial, museum and 9th fort of Kaunas fortress (fig. 5). With its iconic sculptures of the memorial for the victims of World War II and the museum which is an outstanding example of Soviet brutalism this is a strong architectural expression of the Cold War. The integrity and authenticity of the complex suggest that the place has a realistic chance for a serial nomination for the UNESCO World Heritage List, namely as a structure representing the Soviet type of monumental art with great integrity of architecture and sculpture. In this context it is important to note that the museum continues to function as a memorial place and is thus publicly accessible.

Conclusion

If we sum up the short notes on the legacy of socialist architecture in Lithuania first of all it should be mentioned that the constructions of the Stalinist era naturally follow the general principles of “Socialist Realism”. However, due to the relatively modest urban scale they represent regional interpretations of this style rather than internationally important architectural icons. In contrast, among the socialist modernism brought to Lithuania there are some highly important pieces of architectural heritage, such as the Lenin Prize winner Lazdynai, which is an outstanding example of socialist housing. In the end, it is also very important to notice that the discussion on Soviet-time heritage on the level of the UNESCO World Heritage List can be an important step towards more active and successful conservationist activities on the national level.

Zusammenfassung

„Sozialistischer Realismus“: Zeitachse in Litauen

Der Beitrag konzentriert sich auf das architektonische Erbe im sowjetischen Litauen mit Betonung auf dem sozialisti-

schen Realismus. Die stalinistische Architektur erreichte Litauen in ihrer letzten Stufe – nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Die erste sowjetische Besetzung von Litauen (1940/1941) war eine zu kurze Spanne, um signifikante architektonische Spuren zu hinterlassen. Es sollte auch beachtet werden, dass die Wiederaufbauphase nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg sich durch moderate Kapazitäten für neue Konstruktionen auszeichnete. Deshalb wurden die großen Projekte des sozialistischen Realismus erst ab etwa 1950 realisiert. Dieser Prozess war etwa fünf Jahre von Bedeutung – bis 1955. Trotz dieser kurzen Zeitspanne gibt es eine Reihe von repräsentativen Beispielen dieses Stils in Litauen: den Flughafen, die Bibliothek und die Brücke über den Fluss Neris in Vilnius, eine Reihe von aufwendigen Kinos und andere Stätten in ganz Litauen. Deshalb versucht die Präsentation zunächst, diesen Teil des sowjetischen Erbes zu beschreiben. Dennoch sind die sozialistische Epoche und die sozialistische Architektur nicht nur identisch mit Stalinismus. Wenn wir durch das Prisma der Ideologie hindurchschauen, lassen sich Beispiele der sozialistischen Moderne auch mit bestimmten sichtbaren Manifestationen der sozialistischen Welt verbinden. Daher bietet der Beitrag als Diskussionsgrundlage auch prominente Beispiele der sozialistischen Moderne an, wie etwa den Sportpalast in Vilnius oder das Gedenkmuseum der 9. Festung. Der Bericht zielt darauf, eine Vorstellung vom sozialistischen baulichen Erbe in Litauen zu vermitteln.