



LATVIAN ECLECTICISM THROUGHOUT THE POLITICAL CHANGES FROM 1934 TO 1954

In order to explain the framework of time and the political background of this period in the history of Latvian architecture we should remember briefly the main events and persons involved.

15 May 1934 – the overturn of the government, Dr. Kārlis Ulmanis, agriculturist by education, leader of the Peasants' party, formed his authoritarian regime.

23 August 1939 – Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement was signed, Latvia became part of the Soviet Union influence sphere. The Red Army started to build its military bases in Latvia.

28 September 1939 – the repatriation of Baltic Germans began, Latvia lost about 40 thousand citizens, among them up to 40 architects, that was approximately one fifth of the total amount.

17 June 1940 – the aggression was carried out against Latvia by Red Army troops, Latvia was incorporated in the Soviet Union.

22-29 June 1941 – the war zone entered Latvian territory. Old Rīga and Liepāja were heavily damaged. Latvia was incorporated in Reichskommissariat Ostland.

Autumn 1944-May 1945 – more than 200 thousand citizens escaped into exile. The staff of Latvian architects dramatically changed, 55 of 77 members of the Latvian Architects Association have fled into exile. The immigrated architects from the Soviet Union, including Latvian born architects, took key positions in Latvian architecture and construction process.

1954 – In Moscow the Conference of Soviet Builders took place, the bombastic Soviet style of architecture was abandoned, almost a year was needed to prepare the final document, which turned upside down the aesthetics of Soviet architecture: the Decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party "On the elimination of excesses in the design and construction process", which was signed in November 1955. The late International Modernism started in Latvia, too.

The political changes were not only the background of Latvian architecture as the dictators were the founders of the art of building. Ulmanis, inspired by the undertakings of Hitler and Stalin, was greatly concerned by the construction process in Latvia. National identity was the officially proclaimed main task for architects. The doctrine of Ulmanis was: "... to beautify our country by valuable and noble-minded monuments of art and architecture, to encourage the understanding and cultivation of the beauty of our landscape. Not only towns, but also the country side must have rational, useful, proficient and beautiful architecture (...) our construction work must consolidate the Latvian national spirit." May be the most short aphorism by Ulmanis will

better explain the spirit of these times: "We will never have too much of beauty" ('Latvijas arhitektūra', 1938).

The construction process before 1934 was the business of private persons, public organizations, municipalities and different ministries. The procedure of construction was supervised by the Ministry of the Interior. In order to promote the governmental politics into state and municipal commissioned construction processes, Ulmanis established the National Construction Committee in 1936 and led it from 1938 up to the end of his regime two years later. The construction work and the high art of architecture were divided from each other: the simple forms of prefabricated blocks could be in use for industrial buildings and middle or lower class settlements. For the outstanding public buildings there was a small chance to use modern architectural forms, as the design would not pass the National Construction Committee.

The task given to architects was to get free from the German influence, that was considered at that time as the in-born sin of Rīga. Major changes in the capital of Latvia were inspired by Ulmanis himself. According to his orders the large Dome Square was shaped in the centre of Old Rīga in 1936 by pulling down two blocks of three-storeyed medieval buildings. In 1937 the competition for the Palace of Justice was announced and half of the building was constructed by architect Fridrich Skujinš (Rīga 1890 – East-Berlin 1957), just now in use for the Government Office.

The competition for the Rīga City Town Hall were announced, even twice. The first was won by Aleksandrs Klinklāvs (Latvija 1899 – USA 1982) design, inspired by the Stockholm Town Hall. The dominating tower was in use for the participants of the next competition. The place for it was set up in the very core of Old Rīga, facing the Town Square. The medieval buildings were pulled down and the site was prepared. Design can be characterized with the enormous height tower. The competition for the Victory Place was carried out in 1938. This enormous huge complex of buildings and places for the ceremonies should be built at the left bank of Daugava, opposite the Old Rīga. The beginning of World War II stopped all the works.

Monumentalism was the key word for most of the buildings. It seems that one contemporary Latvian style should be invented and used for all construction works commissioned as well as by the state, the municipality or by private persons. In practice the campaign for the beautifying of the rural and urban landscape in 1936 succeeded in two monuments, designed in the twenties, but build during the thirties: Monument to Freedom, and Brethren or War Cemetery.

The complex character of Latvian architecture and the way it was practiced in the period between the world wars led to contradictions. The various efforts developed new

approaches towards architecture. The faculty of Architecture of the University of Latvia was founded in 1918 at the base of the Riga Polytechnic Institute. It consisted of three design classes. Each of them was led by a prominent, professionally-orientated Latvian architect. Class A was directed by Prof. Dr. h.c. Eižens Laubein in the neoclectic idiom. Class B was led by Prof. Dr. arch. Pauls Kundziņš, orientated towards a nationally-minded romanticism. Class C was headed by Assist. Prof. Ernests Štālbergs, ardent believer in the ideas of the modern movement.

Ulmanis authorized himself to rule the construction process at all levels. The professionals were engaged to establish the framework of the Chamber of Professions. Analogies to Germany are rather obvious: All three professional organizations of architects, such as the Rigaer Architekten Verein, the Latvian Architects Association and the Architects Unity were closed in 1939 and the leaders of those organizations were invited to become members of the Chamber of Professions.

It was the time when architects had to change the orientation of their individuality towards a field of conjuncture. The official leader of Latvian architecture was Prof. Eižens Laube (Riga 1880 – USA 1967). He took the position of Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Chairman of the Latvian Architects Association and Head of the Department of Architecture of the National Construction Committee. In his creative work he started with the Art-Nouveau version of National Romanticism that inspired buildings in the first decade of our century. Laube demonstrated his congeniality with the architectural ancestors by using national ornaments in the decoration of his buildings and in the detailing of the fixtures and adjuncts of them. At the same time he left the door open towards a more rational approach to architecture: "It will not be correct to keep ourselves closed against the influences abroad. (...) We are to learn the voices of the spirit of our time as well as the whispers of the local Latvian place." (magazine 'Zalktis', 1908)

Laube evolved from National Romanticism to the neoclassic samples in the twenties, during the time when political changes hardly influenced architecture. The example could be the history of the reconstruction of interiors in the manor house owned by the most prominent publisher in the Baltic states, the family of Benjamiņi in the twenties. Laube was commissioned to decorate one room of their villa in the 'Latvian style'. The rest of the house was designed by an architect from Berlin, well skilled for luxurious interiors. According to the biography of the family, Laube's simple room was influenced by vernacular interiors, without period furniture, and did not fit to the surrounding splendor. The client understood that and Laube was discharged.

In Laube's buildings of the thirties we can find a double code. The concrete framework is recognizable in the glazed elevation of the apartment house in Riga, Brīvības street 39, 1931. To be in context with the existing building, designed by himself in 1908, Laube has added a rather heavy cornice and a classic balustrade. This mood corresponds to the thoughts of Charles Jencks: "It seems desirable that architects recognize the schizophrenia and code their buildings in two levels. Partially this will parallel the "high" and "low" versions of classical architecture, but it will not be, as it was, an homogenous language" (The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, 1977).

The leading contemporary criticist of Latvia architecture, Prof. Jānis Krastiņš pointed out, that "the national architectural concept established in the early 20th century was maintained and developed by a number of architects in the twenties and the thirties, during the years of the independent Latvian Republic. Another innovation was the so-called neoclecticism or revised neoclassicism, producing structures which possessed certain national quality as well." (Latvijas Republikas būvmāksla, R., 1992) Both stylistic tendencies coexisted in the creative work rather of one architect, as it was proclaimed to work in different styles for different clients, situations and tasks.

Laube, as the most prominent designer, as well as the leading theoretician in Latvia before World War II, proclaimed that: "Each understanding gives a different answer to the question 'What is architecture?' Therefore a mistake is made if one thinks that all problems of architecture can be solved on the basis of only one of the theories. Every definition or theory of architecture represents a certain kind of architecture and every manifestation of architecture corresponds to a certain understanding of architecture. In order to solve a question more thoroughly and from different sides sometimes several theories at the same time can be of use." (Understanding of Architecture, Riga 1930) Such dualism was heavily criticized by the younger generation of Latvian architects, following the pure Functionalist style.

The thoughts of Laube to some extent correspond to the conclusion reached by Ch. Jencks fifty years later: "Barring some kind of totalitarian reduction in the heterogeneity of production and consumption, it seems to me desirable that architects learn to use this inevitable heterogeneity of languages. Besides, it is quite enjoyable. Why, if one can afford to live in different ages and cultures, restrict oneself to the present, the local? Eclecticism is the natural evolution of a culture with choice." (The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, 1977)

The hard question for the architects was the role of the international pattern of classical architecture in the process of building the national state. Pauls Kundziņš (Latvia 1888 – Canada 1983), an outstanding architect and researcher in the field of popular constructions, endorsed the use of elements of Latvian wooden architecture in contemporary public buildings. He himself designed apartment houses, schools and churches. Laube's objective was the interpretation of examples from antiquity. He was mostly interested in the comparatively recent history of the dissemination of the classical patterns of a building in various places. One of his major interests was the period of colonial architecture in the United States in the early 19th century. As it was noted by his students, his favorite architect in the USA was Benjamin Latrobe (particularly his U.S. Capitol Building). Laube was especially fond of the rich interior spaces created by Latrobe. He himself designed some well articulated and colourful interiors of public buildings in Latvia: the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, 1922; the Hotel Kemeris, 1935; premises of the President of the Republic of Latvia, and others.

The radical changes started with World War II. Construction works were limited due to the lack of material. During the first Soviet year the process of nationalization private properties and the setting up of new administrative bodies started. In the years of the German occupation the con-

struction work was interrupted but the design process was not totally stopped. The first sketches for the renovation of Old Rīga were drawn in 1942, similar to those, done before the war.

After the end of the war the neoclecticism, in the shape of the so-called 'Socialistic Realism' took the leading position in Latvia. The use of the modern patterns was prohibited and of the classical ones was stimulated by the Committee of Architecture and Construction – the official body, established in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic in order to achieve total building control all over the Soviet Union. The system of pattern design or "typical projects" was set up. The strategy was dictated from Moscow and the tactics

sign, the architect J. Archipov from Moscow arrived. His contribution was the large amount of decors on the façade.

The nationally minded neoclecticism coexisted with the socialistic realism method, according to the principle that "the content of the building must be socialistic and the shape national". The term 'retrospectivism' was invented later to cover the history of architecture during the epoch of Stalin. The skyscrapers in Moscow were the patterns for a new type of building. One of them was designed for Rīga by the outstanding Latvian architect Osvalds Tīlmanis (1900-1980). The silhouette was dictated from Moscow, but in the detailing differences from the Russian pattern, appeared in the sculptural fillings. The Latvian version of the "wedding-cake" architecture of Stalinism is more modest



The pavilion of Latvian SSR in Moscow, by A. Aivars, V. Apsītis, K. Plūksna and V. Zakis (1952)

by the Latvian government. The control of application of them was provided by both institutions.

The survival of the Modern Movement architecture was cut off. The leader of prewar functionalism, Prof. E. Štālbergs, was dismissed from the Faculty of Architecture. The last project designed by him was the first version of the Hotel Rīga in Old Rīga. He suggested to build a nine storey structure, the composition was clear and well defined. Otherwise this heavy block in the historic streetscape of boulevards would have been out of the local scale and therefore unacceptable. The project was commissioned to Prof. Antonovs, the assistant of Prof. Laube before the war, who worked mostly on the elevations, combining elements of the different orders. To ensure the acceptance of the de-

and serener. The best buildings of this afterwar period in Latvia are valuable examples for an approach into the context of the urban fabric.

The last five years provide the opportunity towards a better understanding of the political situation in Latvia during those twenty years of very rapid changes. The negative judgement of academic circles during the sixties concerning the art and architecture of the period immediately before and after the war, still exists in the consciousness of the society. However, the pluralism of the creative methods of our days stimulates a better understanding and the increasing interest for recent architectural history should provide the necessary protection of the buildings as monuments of culture.