



HALFWAY BETWEEN BAROQUE AND BARRACK STYLE: ESTONIAN ARCHITECTURE IN THE STALINIST PERIOD

In June 1940, at the time when Hitler's troops were marching on Paris, the troops of another great dictator, Stalin, were crossing the borders of the three Baltic states. Over the next few months everything changed in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – not just the power mechanism and the form of government, but cultural life was also affected by a drastic change. In the words of a contemporary poet, the world was turning east.

Architecture was a sphere in which particularly rapid change was promised by the new regime. "Since Tallinn has become the capital of a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, all old development plans for the city have been discarded. This is because today we no longer have to consider Soviet Estonia's resources alone, but the scale and needs of the whole Soviet Union. Soviet leaders have pointed out the fact that we must count on the possibility that over the next five years the population of Tallinn may increase as much as threefold." 'Rahva Hääl', the mouthpiece of the Estonian Communist Party wrote just three months after the takeover on September 16th of 1940. It was obvious that the new regime needed a new stage with new scenery.

Oddly enough, while Stalinism attempted to purify Soviet architecture of all modernist and futuristic tendencies, it can also be regarded as a successor of futurism. This is exemplified by one of the basic principles of Stalinist artistic ideology, the complete reshaping of the environment. Just as swamps that were destined to be transformed into fertile fields and deserts into flower gardens, all towns and villages were to be given a new appearance, too. In a broad sense, beauty and Communism were regarded as synonymous. The paradox is, that the buildings erected to symbolize the victory of the new order were in a retrospective style mainly based on architectural forms of the past.

The first period of Soviet power in Estonia lasted only one year. The following summer the country was occupied by German troops, and three years later the country was on the front line again. All major Estonian towns suffered during the hostilities, including Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu. Narva was almost completely destroyed. "We appeal to the whole creative workforce in our profession to consider themselves mobilized to the front. Let us remember that in the next few years the word 'to build' will have as proud a sound as the word 'to fight' had in the heroic years of the war," was the Union of Soviet Architects' appeal of 13 May 1945 to all architects.

How did Estonian architects react to having been "mobilized to the front of socialist reconstruction"? Their numbers had been drastically reduced during the war; first of all, at the expense of those who preferred freedom in the West to liberation by the Soviets. Furthermore, those architects who

stayed at home had mostly been educated either in independent Estonia or in Western Europe (Berlin, Danzig, Karlsruhe, Brno), and the overstrained rhetoric of Soviet architecture must have appeared strange to them in many respects. At first the borderline between what was and what was not permitted did not appear quite clear to them, and therefore a few obviously modernist buildings were erected as late as the late 1940s, for example, the Pirita yacht club in Tallinn (architect Peeter Tarvas, 1948). Other buildings, such as the large ministry building in Gonsiori Street in Tallinn (Peeter Tarvas, Heikki Karro, 1945-50) (ill. 1) seem to have been inspired by Nazi rather than Soviet architecture. Typically for a situation when the state power is trying to exercise very strict control over the arts, the artists themselves did not always know what kind of stylistic expression would be preferred, the result being a heterogeneous eclecticism. Very soon, however, particularly after 1950, when people recently arrived from Russia they were appointed to all leading posts, architects were instructed as to the actual content of socialist realism – above all it signified the triumph of the colonial style dictated from Moscow.

Although Soviet power was proclaimed in Estonia in 1940, the period of Stalinist architecture in the country was only ten years long. As early as 1955 the period was conditionally divided into three phases by the Head of the Architecture Department, Harald Arman, a big boss in those times, and there is no reason why we should reject his classification: Phase I, from 1945 to 1947, was mainly spent on clearing away the war rubble, and the beginning of the restoration of the Estonia opera house was the only outstanding venture in this three-year period. Phase II (1948-49) ushered in large-scale residential buildings mainly in the industrial region of north-east Estonia and in Tallinn; and phase III brought with it the erection of a number of large public buildings. So when compared to most other former Soviet republics the period of Stalinist architecture in Estonia was shorter, and therefore there are relatively fewer buildings dating back to the period than elsewhere.

The architecture of the period was characterized by attention not so much to individual buildings as to ensembles. A symmetrical town centre with clearly outlined dominating features was supposed to express the triumph of socialist architecture over the former haphazard manner of building. In the first postwar years plans were drawn up for the reconstruction of most major Estonian towns; in some cases architectural competitions were organized for that purpose. The drawings were clearly propagandistic in character, often in the form of coloured sketches and elaborate models, and were therefore displayed at exhibitions and written about in periodical publications. This kind of 'paper architecture' had a certain function which real buildings

could not fulfill – to create a vision of socialist cities, buildings and monuments, their colossal measurements intended to manifest the ideology and power of the Communist Party.

It is only natural that the largest number of such architectural drawings were made for the republic's capital city Tallinn. A colossal triumphal arch was planned for the city road on the highway to Leningrad, to greet everyone arriving from the east. Two huge structures, a red granite and light grey dolomite House of Soviets and a Victory Memorial, were intended as dominant features for the city's central square (ill. 2), named Stalin Square in 1948. Both these structures remained on paper; even so, they are symbolic,

with the main building of the Academy of Sciences planned for its vicinity. The opera house, originally built according to drawings by the Finnish architects Armas Lindgren and Wivi Lönn at the beginning of the century, was destroyed during the war and rebuilt in 1945/50 after drawings by Alar Kotli (ill. 4). A domed Academy of Sciences building had been planned for a site opposite the opera on the other side of a wide esplanade. Although the Academy building was not built at that time (in 1966-68 the Estonian Communist Party headquarters were put up on the site), several buildings connected with the ensemble had been erected in that area by the middle of the 1950s (ill. 5): an agricultural cooperatives building (Enn Kaar), a light industry college (Lo-



Tallinn, project by Oleg Lyalin and Paul Härmson for the façade of the House of Soviets, 1952

eloquent examples of the period. The House of Soviets (architect Oleg Lyalin), for example, was to be built into a sort of Cathedral of Socialism (ill. 3). Placed on a high stylobate, with columns passing through all its six floors, it had carved statues lining its cornice, and a hundred-metre tower at one end. Two competitions were organized to find the best design for the Victory Memorial and numerous entries came from all corners of the Soviet Union, most of them in the spirit of typical Soviet gigantomania: a central figure of Stalin, dozens of metres in height, and, in front of the pedestal, a grandstand for the nomenclatura to greet passing parades.

Another of Tallinn's centres, the so-called cultural centre, was to be created on the basis of the Estonian opera house

renz Haljak), as well as some residential buildings (Edgar Velbri, Ilmar Laasi, Erika Nõva, etc.). Most of them were massive, with heavy decor, and looked somewhat neobaroque with their tall gabled roofs. The buildings in the area were intended for the socialist elite – although equality of all citizens was publicly declared, some of the flats in these houses had been designed with servants' rooms.

Centres planned according to the principles of classicism are mostly to be found in the industrial towns of north-east Estonia. Most of these towns were destroyed in World War II so they had to be built up anew. Sillamäe, for example, where uranium production was launched for the first Soviet nuclear bombs, sprang up like a mushroom. Narva,

whose beautiful baroque centre was reduced to ruins in the war, had been intended to be restored in most plans, but was nonetheless left to crumble and a new centre was set up outside the old one. Most of these towns were built, using immigrant labour from Russia, or labour provided by prison camps, while in certain towns former residents were forbidden to return to their homes. Construction was mostly carried out according to standard plans used throughout the whole Soviet Union and the towns became indistinguishable from other industrial towns anywhere in the Soviet Union: wide poplar-lined streets, closed squares, and two to three-storeyed stone houses, all similar to each other. In these towns style has been reduced to a uniform (ill. 7). Besides, the building was of such poor quality that the predominant appearance was "something halfway between baroque and barrack style, where even marble could be finished so that it looked like cheap gypsum", as the short story writer Arvo Valton has put it.

Compared with the industrial towns of north-east Estonia other Estonian towns of the Stalinist period generally look pleasant, for example Pärnu, Keila, Abia, Antsla, Jõhvi and a few others. In most of these towns the administrative and club buildings put up in the period were designed to look like neoclassical porticoed manor houses, and thanks to their traditional exterior they did not clash with earlier buildings. As the campaign to set up collective farms was not launched in Estonia until 1949, the building of imposing collective farm centres was not yet on the agenda at this time. In order to "fight against the hangovers of individualism still prevalent among the peasantry and to propagate collectivism", there were attempts to encourage farmers to move their houses together to form collective farm centres, but fortunately this ridiculous campaign died down almost as abruptly as it had begun.

As the architecture of the time sought continuity with the classical architectural heritage, it also looked for contacts with vernacular art. In fact, one of the main postulates of socialist realism was to have socialist contents within national forms. For a colonial style, which Stalinist architecture was, emphasis on local colour was of major importance.

Aspiration to use local colour was best expressed in two public buildings – the former Estonian pavillon at the Soviet national economy exhibition in Moscow (Harald Arman, Peeter Tarvas, August Volberg, 1950-54) and the Sõprus cinema in Tallinn (Peeter Tarvas, August Volberg, 1952-55) (ill. 8). Motifs of folk art have been used in the decor of both these buildings in combination with Soviet emblems: trailing plant ornaments borrowed from popular embroidery and pokerwork are mixed with hammers, cogwheels, wrenches and other such industrial paraphernalia. The columns of both these buildings had ornamented girdles like embroidered towels and were crowned with capitals of stylized ears of corn; besides, there were 'Estonian' carved elements, ironwork gratings, light fittings, etc.

It is in fact in the so-called regional style that a number of the best buildings of the period have been designed: the House of Political Education (Edgar-Johan Kuusik, 1938-47), the Radio House (Elmar Lohk, Grigori Shumovski, 1939-52) (ill. 9), the House of the Arts Fund (Alar Kotli, 1949-53), the Estonian Consumer Cooperatives' building (Mart Port, 1952-56), etc. Some of these buildings had been



Tallinn, Estonian opera house after the reconstruction by Alar Kotli 1945 to 1950

started before the war – which in itself is an indication of the continuation of the same quest for 'Estonian form' that made itself felt in the architecture of the pre-war independence period. Quite often regionalism was applied even to houses erected in the historical centre – so the façade of one of the largest blocks of flats in the Old Town of Tallinn (Ilmar Laasi, 1952-54) (ill. 10) that bears a close resemblance to a nearby Art Nouveau house, as a result of which the two buildings give the impression of being an ensemble. A similar case can be seen in Tartu, where one side of the Town Hall Square was destroyed during the war and then was carefully restored in order to avoid any contrast with the former, mostly 18th century appearance of the square (Ines Jaagus, Arnold Matteus).

Of course, buildings directly based on the Russian Empire style were erected too. As a rule, they were designed not by local, but by Moscow or Leningrad architects. One of the most conspicuous examples of this style is the Naval Officers' House in Tallinn (A. Kusnetsov, 1950-54), a characteristic example of architectural retrospectivism in Estonia. Planned as the opening chord to an impressive avenue, the present Mere avenue, its front was decorated with Corinthian columns and the side façades in the Doric order, as well as numerous ornaments, figured reliefs, etc. The same ostentatious style continues inside the building, giving the impression of something resembling Zakharov's Admiralty or Rossi's Mary Theatre in St. Petersburg. This is not the on-

Tallinn, the so-called Cultural Centre with the opera in the foreground





Tallinn, Sõprus Cinema by Peeter Tarvas and August Volberg, 1952-1955



Tallinn, Radio House by Elmar Lobk and Grigori Sbumovski, 1939-1952

ly building balanced on the borderline between sublimity and kitsch, like the Gerasimov Palace of Culture in Narva or railway stations such as the one in Valga.

The "period of exaggerations" as it was later named, ended rather abruptly – two years after Stalin's death. The new building policy ruled out any use of ornamentation: bosses, scrolls, turrets and the like. Decor was suppressed even in buildings started in the previous period, and nowadays, with their large expanses of plain wall and small windows, these houses look particularly monstrous. On the one hand, the decisions made after Stalin's death liberated architecture from the dictate of neoclassicism, but on the other hand, they forced it onto a Procrustean bed of standard designs and unified features. Whereas earlier, annual architectural prizes had been given for elaborate drawings alone, from now on the budget was to be the decisive factor – it had to be as low as possible. As a result, the following decade from 1955 to 1965, was in many respects much more of a lean period for Estonian architecture than the decade immediately after the war.

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