ANNOTATIONS

Marija Drėmaitė, Vaidas Petrulis, Jūratė Tutlytė. *Architektūra sovietinėje Lietuvoje*, Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2012, 411 p. ISBN 978-609-447-024-0

The history of Soviet architecture and design has been steadily evolving in the interstices of social history and main stream history of art. Being a node that brings together artists and industrial and political decision-makers, architecture is an object *par excellence* that lends itself to the study of attempts at rational planning and absurd failures, aspirations to beauty and the starkly evident poverty in Soviet society. This monograph, ‘Architecture in Soviet Lithuania’, collectively authored by Marija Drėmaitė, Vaidas Petrulis and Jūratė Tutlytė, is a long-awaited first attempt at a comprehensive history of architecture in post Second World War Lithuania.

The monograph is organised into several thematic chapters, which largely follow chronological order. Having outlined the connections between Soviet ideology, administrative power, the economics of shortage and the theory and techniques of architectural work, the book begins its story with the sovietisation of the 1940s and 1950s. As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the introduction of Socialist Realist architecture in Lithuania involved megalomaniac projects for postwar reconstruction in Vilnius’ centre, many of which, however, never came to fruition. After Khrushchev banned the Stalinist decorative and excessive style of architecture in 1954, the following decade was marked by a shift to the mass-housing projects of the 1960s, principally characterised by low-cost and low-quality buildings. Further chapters detail the emergence of socialist modernism and attempts at transcending budget functionalism. The second half of the book is focused on the communist construction of a welfare society through the introduction of centralised urban planning, the building of new types of mass-housing in both urban and rural environments, and construction of buildings for leisure and recreation. The role of design in the socialist economy is discussed in the final chapter.

The chapters are written by individual authors, but the book has a smooth narrative which joins them into a very readable and coherent whole. The narrative traces local responses and reactions to centrally set programmes and regulations, as well as responses to the often choking economic

limitations, and guides the reader through the material sedimentations of the Soviet version of modernity.

The book suggests that in the framework of Soviet ideology, architecture was not seen as a simple technical activity, but as an artistic activity, fundamentally charged with socio-political tensions. In line with this view, the transfer of architectural styles from the capitalist West was tightly controlled. Nevertheless, certain building techniques were transferred, such as the use of the French 'Camus' pre-fab system at the all-Union level. At the local Lithuanian level, some Western (Nordic) urban planning techniques served as inspiration. For example, Stockholm's Vällingby suburb was used as a model for new suburbs in Vilnius. Indeed, Lithuanian architects often received prestigious all-Union prizes for suburban planning, their principal advantage being the ability to set their buildings in attractive spots in the natural environment (p. 173).

The introduction of socialist realism, and later of modernist functionalism, it is argued in the book, was driven by centrally-set policies from Moscow. However, in Lithuania there was some elbow room for local architects to manoeuvre and introduce, albeit carefully, and not always successfully, their own modifications. As early as 1955, Vytautas Nasvytis voiced a need for 'local architects', able to express 'local traditions and national character' (p. 82). Many examples covered in the book show that the local modifications consisted of attempts to build lower-rise buildings, and integrate them in a more organic way into the man-made and 'natural' environments. Another important feature of Soviet Lithuanian architecture, argue the authors, was the continuation of some of interwar modernist stylistics in the modernist buildings of the 1960s and 1970s; something which was best seen in the design of private villas.

All these slight variations converged into what the authors call a 'critical regionalism', exhibited by much of Soviet Lithuanian architecture. Few buildings could seem to be farther detached from the monolithic mass-housing than the romantic, thatched cottage-type buildings which started to emerge on the Lithuanian coast. One of these buildings, the Vaidilutė cafe, was built at the personal demand of the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party Antanas Sniečkus (p. 113). Klaipėda saw various interpretations of traditional timber-structured houses erected. The authors argue, on the basis of these examples, that like Alvar Aalto, Paul Rudolph and Oskar Niemeyer, Soviet Lithuanian architects searched for a local idiom: they consciously harnessed the local versions of international modernism in architecture, in order to break away from the impoverished dogmas.

Nevertheless, centrally set urban plans and general siting plans to a large extent determined the architectural possibilities. A strong trend was that of mass-housing, which preferred high-rise apartment blocks in both urban and rural areas. In 1958, the building of individual houses was banned in the cities; however, 1959 saw a change in the general plan, which limited

the growth of the major cities and focused on expanding provincial towns. At that time Lithuania's population was only 39% urban. A focus on developing smaller towns, argues the book, was conducive to attracting people from the surrounding countryside, and, in this way, preventing shortages of local labour, and thus, argue the authors, the need to import workers from Russia (p. 137). Planning and architecture, in this way, constituted a sphere of soft power that enabled some Soviet Lithuanian decision-makers to pursue slightly divergent paths from Moscow.

Not all the routines were documented in the archives, as informal demands were of great importance in the bargain-driven state socialist economy. Acknowledging this, the book benefits from many interviews with Lithuanian architects. The architects recall that they were continuously pressurised by the construction companies to keep costs to a minimum and constructions at the most basic and simple level. Pervading shortages led to the formation of the 'ascetic functionalism' of the 1960s, which was oriented around the norms of minimal requirements in terms of living area and furnishing. It was held, for example, that nine square metres was a sufficient living area per person, and hence that a family of four should find a one-bedroom apartment perfectly comfortable; it was only a five to seven person family that could qualify for a two-bedroom flat. Apartment blocks, day-care centres, schools and culture houses were based on typical plans, utmost utilitarian, built with poor materials and with little aesthetic effort; all these buildings contributed to the 'greying of Eastern Europe', as it was poignantly put by Paul Josephson.

The ascetic functionalism of the Khrushchev period was eventually complemented by somewhat more generous planning and aesthetic innovation in the second half of the 1960s. The year 1964 saw the building of highlights of more visionary modernist architecture such as the Vasara restaurant in Palanga, the Vilnius cinema, and an extension for the Salomėja Nėris Secondary School in Vilnius. For the nomenclature elites, improved apartment blocks were built with more generous kitchen and living areas; the creative artistic unions were also able to build apartments with studio space, higher ceilings, and more generous storage areas for their members. Indeed, some of the nomenclature apartments even featured rooms for maids, suggesting that even communist architecture could be bent to accommodate a bourgeois life-style.

What is interesting here, however, is that those improved versions of Soviet elite housing were never ostentatious: from the outside, the apartment blocks differed little from ordinary ones; only a trained eye would notice somewhat better building materials. The same was true for the cooperative apartment blocks, co-funded by enterprises and built specially for their employees who had to actually buy these flats. The construction of cooperative apartment blocks was launched as early as 1963. The highest elites, in turn, retreated to private villas in the quiet areas of Turniškės

and Antakalnis (pp. 177–178). It was only more interestingly planned flats for artists which might attract attention as a divergence from the ascetic modernist style.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the introduction of new materials and more aesthetic experimentation in Soviet Lithuania. The most distinctive experimentation was done in the building of the ‘leisure machine’: hotels, yacht clubs and spas all over the country. However, many of these ‘new’ materials were depressingly basic: even the use of red and yellow bricks or a plastered facade was a mark of a more distinguished building. The technical poverty of Soviet construction also obstructed the imitation of the fashionable style of displacing buildings’ functional structures to the outside, as was done in the Pompidou Centre in Paris, for example. Restricted by technical limitations, the most innovative Soviet Lithuanian architecture played instead with large, blank wall surfaces. Although quite a few successful examples of such buildings could be listed, such as the Exhibition Palace (1967) and the Museum of the Revolution (1980) in Vilnius, even this architecture only reinforced the generally grey and impersonal atmosphere of crumbling concrete cityscapes.

The book balances rather well its bird’s-eye view of the history of Soviet Lithuanian architecture with specific details. However, it would have been interesting to have one close-up case study of a building or a neighbourhood. The volume covers the design of new industrial towns, such as Grigiškės, around a paper factory, and Elektrėnai, centred around an electric power plant, where local architects appear to have had some freedom in trying to design a more humane, low-rise urban environment. A detailed case study of one of these towns, or perhaps even of one building, could serve to demonstrate the ambitions and failures of Soviet architecture.

Although the book does not completely ignore the comparative approach in the way that it focuses on the conditions and outcomes for local architectural experiments, one might wish for a deeper engagement with the literature on Soviet Russian architecture and design. An investigation of the archives in Russia would most likely cast additional light on the dependency and autonomy of Lithuanian architects and builders from the central planning organs, and perhaps a Russian view on the Lithuanian ‘critical regionalism’. In addition, a comparison with other East European versions of state socialist architectural modernism would also be quite welcome, especially because the authors themselves point out that sometimes Soviet Lithuanian architects chose to follow, for example, Czechoslovak examples rather than Russian ones in territorial planning (p. 122).

Finally, the book contains a lot of material that would allow the authors to engage in wider ongoing debates about the history of Soviet Lithuania. The recent volume ‘Searching for the Roots of Sąjūdis’ by Jūratė Kavaliauskaitė and Ainė Ramonaitė (2011) pointed out the importance of alternative networks in creating a social milieu for the aspiration to poli-

tical sovereignty in Lithuania. The architects and designers, together with their clients, could also be seen as constituting a particular socio-material milieu, the political implications of which remain to be explored. Perhaps it is a future task for Lithuanian historians of architecture to join other scholars in reevaluating the organisation of Soviet society.

Last but not least, the book is beautifully designed and lavishly illustrated. It contains a well-annotated catalogue of important architectural objects, which will be an invaluable resource for professionals, students and the interested general public. As it is already published in paperback, this large volume is also relatively portable. It will, I believe, become an important reference book for any historian, sociologist and cultural studies researcher of the Soviet period, and it would be great to see it translated into English.

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