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Baltic Shores, Western Winds: Lithuanian Architects and the Subversion of Soviet Norms

John V. Maciukas

For the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the 20th century has often provided a dramatic affirmation of the old adage that geography is destiny. The fates of these nations have been tied to the expansion and contraction of neighboring states such as Poland, Russia and Germany for longer than many Baltic citizens care to remember. As a result, periods of independence like the interwar period of 1920 to 1939 or the recently regained independence that dates to March 1991 have taken on heightened significance as times when national identity and culture must be affirmed.

One historical constant in Lithuania since 1945 has been the persistence of a “Westward gaze” among architects as an expression of national and cultural identity. And though certainly not reducible to a single cause, the wish to participate culturally and politically in a community of western European nations can be understood as one response to Lithuania’s historical subordination to foreign neighbors. Present-day Lithuanians live in the shadow of the period from the 17th century until 1795 when Lithuania occupied a junior position in a Polish-Lithuanian state, and from then until after 1918, when it held an even more subordinate position as a province ruled by Russian tsars. The period of national independence between 1920 and 1939 offered the first sustained opportunity to establish the culture and symbols of independent nationhood, although these were surrendered to the Soviet Union after 1945.

The cultural nationalism expressed through architecture during the Soviet era can be understood as a kind of substitute for the political nationalism that was repressed until the glasnost period of the 1980s. Today these architectural expressions of political and cultural identity may provide an important index of the pent-up thoughts, feelings, and energies of Lithuanians during these decades. In a region where notions of identity—Lithuanian or otherwise—have been contested for so long, examining the record of the built landscape is one way to render a clearer picture of recent Lithuanian accomplishments.

One would be hard pressed to identify a single, cohesive, Lithuanian building tradition. Pre-Soviet indigenous Lithuanian domestic architecture, for example, belongs to a variegated northern European and Scandinavian tradition of wooden house-building that features steep, sloping roofs that protect against an unforgiving local climate. Reflecting regional differences across the villages of Lithuania, vernacular builders have tended to erect clusters of buildings that hug the land, orient toward the sun, defend against the wind, and feature hand-crafted wooden ornaments of plants, the sun, and other natural motifs. On the other hand, towns and cities contain mainly brick, stone, and concrete constructions along with a variety of eclectic and modernist buildings designed not only by Lithuanian architects but also by builders from Russia, Poland, Germany, and as far away as Italy. But overall, it is the respect for nature exhibited by rural structures that has inspired modernist architects to work with a particular Lithuanian genius loci.

The era of Soviet rule, which began for the Baltic states in 1945, brought massive changes to the country and its population, 80 percent of which still lived outside of cities and towns as late as 1940. Incorporation into the Soviet Union brought a wholesale program of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization. As one local observer noted in 1990: “more than three times the number of buildings were built during the fifty-year Soviet period as were built during the previous several centuries.” In the face of such change, and with a history of only fragile national independence, Lithuanian builders and architects clung to the sense of a building “tradition” that evinced a noticeably hybrid character. Features of this tradition included respect for nature derived from vernacular builders, local inflections of selected foreign styles and planning influences, and a determined effort to reflect the latest trends in western modernism. In particular, the effort to participate in the evolution of western thought formed an integral part of Lithuanian architects’ self-definition. Both during the first period of national independence in the 1920s and 1930s as well as during the Soviet period, leading architects equated the expression of western architectural sensibilities on
Lithuanian soil with two important, linked ideas: distance from Russian dominance and participation in a western community of democratic nations. Hence, modern architecture has served in part to symbolize a measure of psychological and cultural freedom—and, of course, political independence.

Parenthetically, in spite of experiencing two complete and opposing paradigm shifts in the last half century (first of incorporation into the Soviet Union, and then of the sudden arrival of post-Cold War independence), Lithuania's hybrid building tradition has proved remarkably resilient. And since the end of the Cold War the characteristics of this tradition—which cannot be taken too literally, but which are more like a set of common tendencies—have been finding expression in a new and still-transitional democratic, capitalist, political culture.

What may be most surprising to readers unfamiliar with the internal cultural politics of the former Soviet Union is that some of the most western-oriented, independent-minded impulses of the hybrid Lithuanian tradition were able to surface in works of Lithuanian architects even during the most trying years of Soviet domination.

Recently Lithuanian architects have acknowledged their indebtedness to the architecture of the earlier period. Gedeminas Baravykas (1941–1995), a well-travelled, prolific Lithuanian architect, after graduating from the architecture program at the Vilnius Arts Academy in 1964, was responsible for the design of numerous buildings and monuments. Baravykas perceptively and critically analyzed the historical influence of Western architecture in Lithuania in presentations in the U.S. (1989) and in Estonia (1990). In articles and interviews, Baravykas maintained that his own works were deeply indebted to the preceding generation. These older architects, he explained, had opened the door for younger Lithuanian architects by securing a significant degree of creative independence from Russian officials in Moscow.

After independence in 1991, as Lithuanian architectural professionals and critics reevaluated their country's architecture, a pronounced shift appeared in the emphasis of such architectural discussions. The very title of a 1992 article in the national press, "Architecture of the Soviet Period weighed on the Scales of History," contributed to a new sense of finality with which Lithuanians viewed their participation in the Soviet sphere of influence. The article, written by Jonas Minkevičius, opened with a dramatic quote by Baravykas to the Lithuanian Architects Union: "We are not at all ashamed of our works from the Soviet period," Baravykas declared, "I do not reject a single one of my creations." An important implication of Minkevičius's article was that while such projects as grand Stalinist apartment blocks and ubiquitous statues of Lenin were clearly part of an ideologically-driven urbanist program in Soviet-era Lithuania, other projects managed to pursue a different agenda.

Today it is possible to ask to what extent, and with what force, such a legacy of "Western influence" can be detected in Lithuanian architecture of the Soviet years—that is, between 1945 and 1991. And if such influence existed, when and how did it begin, and how was it negotiated in a Cold War atmosphere in which Soviet rule, at least to western eyes, was perceived as unequivocally opposed to western ‘capitalist’ and ‘bourgeois’ design? Archival and published evidence indicates that independent gestures of resistance were made by Lithuanian architects as far back as the Khrushchev thaw of the mid-1950s. These declarations were followed with guarded applications of western ideas, realized in projects in the 1960s and 1970s.

As a recent graduate of the Lithuanian Academy of Arts at the time of Josef Stalin’s death in 1953, Algimantas Nasytis was among the first to protest Soviet design policies. In a still-celebrated defense of Vilnius’ old town to the Russian-appointed head of the Lithuanian S.S.R. Architects’ Union at their Second Congress in Vilnius in 1955, Nasytis compared the buildings of the Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque periods to postwar interventions in the urban fabric. “If construction in the center of Vilnius continues to follow its present path, then without exception it will be maintained. In a few decades society will judge us—the architects of today—to have been barbarians, the despisers of our capital.” To protect this heritage, Nasytis and design colleagues of his generation, notably Vytautas Brėdikis and Vytautas Ėkanauskas, pushed for policies that would allow new construction to be located far outside the old center of Vilnius, preferably beyond an insulation greenbelt of forests. Their concerns were particularly directed toward the large-scale, industrially manufactured housing blocks that then formed the cornerstone of Soviet housing policy, as defined by Khrushchev in the mid-1950s.

Available evidence suggests that these and other Lithuanian architects succeeded in resisting the lockstep advance of housing policies from Moscow as early as the late 1950s and early 1960s. The key contribution of architects from this period, such as Brėdikis, Ėkanauskas, Balčiūnas and Valiuskis, was Vilnius’ second mikrorajonas, or residential satellite city of prefabricated concrete panel-block buildings, built at Lazdynai (Figs. 1, 2). A typical project for 40,000 residents, built within the framework of a tightly organized Soviet command economy, Lazdynai must also be understood as one of a few trail-blazing attempts to break with the bureaucratic rigidity of large-scale central
planning. The architects themselves, however, are the first to admit that their tactics could do little more than provide a buffer against the tightly controlled, hierarchical program of Moscow-based central planning. Their input could not, for example, prompt a complete redesign of housing schemes, only lead to changes in site planning and housing-block design that challenged the existing order of things.

One stimulus for Lithuanian departures from Soviet norms, lingering from the period of independence of the 1930s in which Nasyvys, Bredikis, and Cekeanas had spent their youths, was the difference between the role of the architect in the Lithuanian and Soviet contexts. Opposing the Soviet tendency to subordinate the architect’s role to that of economists, policy-makers, and planners in charge of all-encompassing five-year plans, Lithuanian architects (to hear Nasyvys describe it) clung to notions of a duty to their profession that was “higher than simply drawing,” and extended to the organization of spatial experience, the promotion of harmony between buildings and the landscape, and the consideration of inhabitants’ and users’ needs. By contrast, the extreme top-down nature of the Soviet housing system has been vividly described by Italian housing scholar Romano del Nord:

“Like a series of bureaucratic pyramids converging toward a single vertex, central building committees, economic planning offices, regional institutions, and republican branches take part in a vertical flow of orders and guidelines. This structure permits almost no communication horizontally, and no constructive feedback between administrative branches.”

If the subordination of the architects’ creative will is not obvious from the rigid appearance of ubiquitous urban housing blocks that earned protest even in the heartland of Russia, then del Nord’s description helps capture the institutional obstacles to creativity built into the Soviet planning system.

In Lithuania, although designs for Lazdynai were ready as early as 1962, construction was delayed to allow for the coordination of different building phases. Ultimately, these delays allowed local architects and planners to concentrate on developing alternative housing models, even if these had to be worked out within the strictures of the prefabricated 3x3-meter panel construction system developed by Gosstroy, the Soviet planning ministry (which, in turn, had been a revival of methods introduced by the German architect Ernst May in the early 1930s).

Lazdynai today differs noticeably from typical housing sites primarily in that it consists of a series of stepped, forested terraces running parallel to the river Neris. Whereas standard Soviet and East Bloc procedure was to
level a site to make it easier for cranes to set up on either side of a building, Brédikis and Ėkanauskas argued that building with the hillsides would soften the effects of such a massive development, distributing it across the landscape. The Lithuanian architects were driven not simply by a desire to build at variance with the Soviet system. Rather, they were attempting to follow lessons derived from Finland, where the rolling hills, forests, and general landscape character resemble those of the Baltic states. Brédikis and Ėkanauskas, in particular, had both been part of official delegations of Soviet architects on visits to Finland in 1959 and 1960.

Brédikis’s observations of Finnish architecture prompted several of the departures from Soviet design doctrine that the Lazdynai project would come to embody. Both he and Ėkanauskas acknowledged the strong impressions left by such examples of Alvar Aalto’s projects as Sunila, Kaukua, and Tapiola from the late 1930s to the 1950s. Aalto’s quest to humanize modernism was perhaps most evident in his designs for housing, in which he acted on the belief that large concrete structures did not necessarily have to project an ethos of domination over the sites on which they stood. Thus, his plans were laid out so as to fit large housing blocks in the best way possible to the existing contours of the hilly, wooded Finnish landscape. For example, many of his large buildings at Sunila and Kaukua were fitted into the folds of hillsides and along ridgelines, while others climbed up through forested areas in a stepped or terraced fashion.

The humanizing potential of Aalto’s designs for large-scale housing was not lost on the Lithuanian visitors. Back home, when ordered to design mikroraiionas for an average of 30,000 residents, they proposed to Russian officials that they be allowed to develop their own block-and-panel system, one that would add variety to existing Soviet models. Initially, this request did not get very far. Permission was denied when Gosstro planning officials from the local Lithuanian branch informed the architects that, in the view of central authorities in Moscow, such variant panel systems were unnecessary and impractical. Living at the Soviet periphery had its advantages, however. One was that of 130 housing combines in the Soviet Union during the 1960s, three were at work producing prefabricated panels in Lithuania. Working with Lietprojekt, the Lithuanian Ministry of Construction, a portion of a housing combine outside the city of Kaunas was quietly retrofitted to produce a different variety of housing block. This building would use the same concrete paneling system, but would be broken in plan to allow it to follow existing relief lines on a terraced site.

In 1960, in the Moscow journal Novy Mir (New World), Russian journalist Alexander Nezny recounted the official response to Lithuania’s construction of an independent housing model. “When the secret came out while the building was under construction, the Lithuanian Republic State Construction Committee supported the work of the local branch of the State Ministry of Construction in Kaunas, though it resented the lack of confidence in it shown by the architects.” Other researchers of housing in the Baltic states have shown that the Soviet Union did tolerate a certain amount of what it called “democratic centralism”—a principle by which local and central policies were allowed to differ. But these differences were usually limited to the relative amount of expenditure on items like education and other services. In this instance the architects had clearly taken matters into their own hands, reappropriating important aspects of planning and construction control from their proper place in the Soviet hierarchy.

Nezny’s article also makes the significant point that it was the Republic level of the State Construction Committee that resisted, but eventually supported, the architects of Lazdynai. And he explained how, after support became official on the local level, the architects gradually revealed six more designs for different types of housing blocks that they had been developing for the Lazdynai project. Bearing in mind that there were only eight panel-housing designs in existence in the entire Republic of Lithuania, it was significant that stepped, terraced housing blocks and five other alternative designs were now under consideration for a single mikroraiion. As the architects explained, they gained local support for each of their alternative designs over a long period, introducing them one at a time and convincing officials that the designs were sound and, more importantly, buildable within the limits of existing Soviet construction capabilities. Gaining this support at the local level proved easier as time went on, for after it became clear that residential organization, traffic patterns, and quality of life would be improved by the project, local officials had less trouble granting their approval.

Eventually the ability to draw on local Lithuanian support from the Building Ministry and from the heads of the Lithuanian Communist Party proved crucial in the arduous negotiations to gain approval for construction changes from Moscow officials. By the end of this process, when accountability came to rest back on the shoulders of officials in Lithuania who had already been convinced of the merits of the project, seven different house-block designs for buildings between five and nine stories were approved to accommodate the complex relief lines of local topography at Lazdynai (Fig. 3). Six of these were variations of the broken-plan buildings that followed hillside contours, while a sev-
enth new type climbed slopes of up to 15 percent grade in a stepped fashion (Fig. 4). The architects also dispersed housing blocks among the hills while leaving sections of forest intact, and new planting was added once construction had been completed. The architects took these measures in the hope that “nature would be a partner to the architecture, rather than a victim” (an observation that again showed Aalto’s influence). The layout and careful placement of block types also afforded views into the surroundings for the greatest number of apartments. And, further reflecting the influence of the Finnish achievements in accommodating nature, architects Brédikis and Čekanauskas wrote at the time:

“The view through a window has a profound impact on an individual’s psychology... This view is the spatial continuation of the interior, an inseparable part of the surroundings in which a person lives. A real visual connection with one’s surroundings is a fundamental part of designing for an apartment’s overall comfort.”

The construction delays, which had lasted through years of negotiations, also allowed the architects and planners of Lazdynai to depart from Soviet housing practices in their integration of infrastructure, site planning, and circulation networks. For clues on recent western thinking in these areas, Brédikis and Čekanauskas used information
available from early 1960s French architecture journals about the efforts of Team X architects to rework the street in modern architectural contexts. Influenced by the way Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, and Shadrach Woods had reconceived Toulouse-Le-Mirail along the lines of “new urban units,” Brédikis, in particular, pushed for an analogous separation of pedestrian and automobile street networks in the plan of the mikrorajon (Figs. 2, 5).\(^\text{24}\)

Such integrated planning, attention to users’ subjective experience, and the separating of vehicular from pedestrian traffic are, of course, far from revolutionary in a western context. Their significance at Lazdynai lies in their contribution of previously unacknowledged and unwelcome approaches to Soviet mikrorajon design. Where recent western scholarly accounts document in increasing detail a history of Soviet housing that revolved around reductive calculations of square meters of living space per person, it is notable that the designs for Lazdynai by Brédikis and Čekanauskas directly opposed this policy.\(^\text{25}\) Their project for the terraced site at Lazdynai was a direct contravention of the Soviet centralized bureaucratic structure.

From a historical point of view the completion of the project led to a juxtaposition of ironies. After years of bureaucratic opposition, Lazdynai was awarded the Lenin Prize for All Union Architectural Design in 1972. And, following this award, the project became something of a standard-bearer for ‘Socialist’ design excellence. It was featured on the cover of the East Block’s most comprehensive international survey of modern panel-block housing developments, Werner Rietdorf’s Neue Wohngebiete sozialistischer Länder, Berlin, 1972.\(^\text{26}\) To the casual observer, Laz-
dynai represents a Socialist housing scheme, a set of new and badly needed apartments churned out according to an industrialized panel-block building system. But for those familiar with the numbing repetitiveness and drab features typical of East Bloc mikronai, the project signifies direct western influence through its appearance and underlying organization.

In their work the Lazdynai architects sought to make a linkage with Western architectural currents that was entirely consistent with the efforts Baravykas later highlighted. The recurrence of this “Westward gaze” among leading architects reflects, in fact, the fusion of a Soviet-era Lithuanian historical longing with a practical strategy on the part of Lithuanian cultural and political leaders to support expressions of independent nationhood through culture. In so doing, these leaders underscored the geographical and historical realities that have, more often than not, consigned residents of this Baltic “mini-nation” to life as part of a Russian- or Polish-dominated conglomerate state.2 Projects like Lazdynai preserved and expressed the same will to independent action that resurfaced when Lithuania became the first republic to secede from the Soviet Union in 1990.

Editor’s Note: An earlier version of this article appeared in the Fall, 1999 issue of Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review, under the title “East Bloc, West View.”

Notes


7. J. Minkevičius, article cited in note 4, pp. 8–9.

8. Minutes of the Lithuanian Architects Union, as discussed by J. Vaškauskas, article cited in note 9.


11. Others included the diversion of funds from urban construction projects in Vilnius Old Town to build Lithuania’s first freeway, connecting Vilnius to Lithuania’s second largest city, Kaunas.


16. One is hard pressed to locate examples in the former East Bloc and Soviet Union of housing blocks built on sloping sites. See, for example, the author-
تُذكر faire survey of Soviet and East Bloc housing developments by the G.D.R.
18. Čekanauskas explained that Finland and the Finnish architects “left the
greatest impression,” since to him Finland “felt like a country similar to our
own . . . it had a very similar environment . . . and it obtained independence
from the Russians in 1918,” roughly the same time period as Lithuania’s
first independence (Čekanauskas interview, June 12, 1992). See also the dis-
19. Čekanauskas acknowledged that this retrofit of a production plant would
have been impossible but for the cooperation and support of the plant’s for-
ward-thinking manager, Samuel Lubeckis, a Jewish descendant of concen-
tration camp survivors. (Čekanauskas interview, June 12, 1992)
21. A. Bohnet and N. Penkaitis. *A Comparison of Living Standards and
Consumption Patterns between the RSFSR and the Baltic Republics,”* _Journal
22. Vytautas Čekanauskas and Algimantas Nasiytis interviews (June 12,
1992); Gediminas Baranyskas interview (June 21, 1992).
24. “Toulouse-Le-Mirail: City of 100,000 Inhabitants,” _Architecture, Forme,
Function_ 16. 1971. pp. 346–358; Bredillas interview (June 16, 1992);
Čekanauskas interview (June 12, 1992), where Čekanauskas recalled that
he had been trained in the 1950s by older teachers who had been active well
before World War II. In the prevar decades of independence, Lithuanian
architects prized architectural journals from France and Germany highly,
and though they were forbidden to be studied under Soviet rule, they still
commanded great interest among students. Articles in the 1980s are again
popularizing the achievements of architects during the last period of inde-
pendence—especially those who strove to design in the tradition of Euro-
pean modernism. See the discussion in E. Gudas, ”Gerus Pamatus Padug: Apie
1918–1940m. Lietuvos Architektūra ir jos Karaljus” (Having laid down
good foundations: Lithuanian Architecture and its creators from
25. Historian Stephen Kotkin discusses how living space per square meter
came to define the relationship between “space and subjectivity” in Soviet
housing after 1917. See his _Shelter and Subjectivity in the Stalin Period: a
Case Study of Magnitogorsk,” in _Russian Housing in the Modern Age_ (ed.
26. Werner Reindorf, source cited in note 16.
27. “Mini-nations” was the term adopted by scholars committed to a field
of Baltic Studies in the west, which opposed Soviet occupation by continu-
ing to chart the social, economic, and cultural trends of the three Baltic
states. See, for example, A. Ziedonis, Jr. et al. (eds.). _Problems of Minina-
tions: Baltic Perspectives_. San Jose, CA. 1973. A more critical and recent eval-
uation of Baltic politics and culture can be found in Lieven, _The Baltic
Revolution_ (see note 1). Vytautas Kavoliūs updates cultural reworkings of his-
torial themes in the 1990s Lithuanian national revival in his *The Second
Lithuanian Revival: Culture as Performance,* _Lituanus: The Lithuanian