

Architectural Excursion as a Tool: Modernist Vilnius Case

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ABSTRACT. The paper is focused on the impact of the public architectural excursions in the discourse of marginal modernist heritage of Soviet residential districts. It is argued that architectural public tours are one of the most acceptable tools for both professional experts (creating a platform for knowledge of status quo at a scale of 1:1 – the real basis for further research and for the start of the re-thought modernisation) and wider audience, especially residents of the districts (re-appreciating the local identity, increasing the added value of the districts, provoking to take the initiative to improve the habitat).

KEYWORDS: architectural excursions, community involvement, contemporary heritage, Vilnius modernist architecture, Soviet residential districts, modernisation.

Lithuanian history of the 20th century was marked by coercive collectivisation in the 1950s and rapid growth of industry in the 1970s – the key factors that caused people’s migration to cities. Sudden need of a living space for numerous factory workers demanded for fast and cheap building technology. In Vilnius, as well as in other European cities, the solution came up to be the implementation of iterative multi-storey dwelling projects. During the second half of the 20th century, the area and the number of residents of Lithuania’s capital city Vilnius were growing as never before. Despite the fact that during the Second World War, Vilnius had lost more than a half of its population and almost a half of its buildings were destroyed, till the early 1990s the area of the city increased several times, as well as the number of citizens exceeding half a million. This kind of rapid expansion has led to an essential change in the city structure and cityscape; on the other hand, regarding the fact that these changes took place in a relatively short time, they have shown a serious threat for the city to lose its identity.

This new city, being emerged in the light of “construction of communism”, is still considered controversial. On the one hand, industrialised mass construction was practised in the whole continent (in the East as well as in the West), during the post-war period. On the other hand, in Eastern Europe it had a strong political nuance – here mass construction served as an attribute of new communist society.

The new socialist city having emerged in the suburbs of Vilnius over 30 years still has the major share in the housing fund that shall be re-thought and re-activated in the twenty-first century. The technocratic modernisation programme [1] contains neither a clear policy nor criteria or extensive research on how to deal with still unprivileged modernist urban and architectural heritage that undergoes changes and irreversibly loses its previous shape during the processes of modernisation. The growing public interest in the modernist heritage and increasing research on the subject have also involved the grey brother of Modernism – the residential or the so-called “sleeping” districts – prompting to

ask whether the former socialist city is truly unable to meet the today’s needs (particularly, in the context of the mass housing phenomena of the 21st century). Why the urban and architectural heritage of residential districts is not regarded appropriately? What are the ways to initiate the environmental improvement by the very residents? “Architecture is necessary to strengthen the understanding of society as well as to raise the awareness of key habitat conditions and their outlook” [2], and architectural public tours are one of the most acceptable tools to achieve this – for both professional experts (creating a platform for knowledge of status quo at a scale of 1:1 – the real basis for further research and for the start of the re-thought modernisation) and wider audience, especially residents of the districts (consolidating their perception and appreciation of local identity, increasing the added value of the districts, provoking to take the initiative).

I. EXPERIMENTAL EXCURSION AROUND THE SOCIALIST EXPERIMENT

From the 60s to 90s, the north-western suburbs of Vilnius were occupied by the new socialist city arranging nine new districts (Lazdynai, Karoliniškės, Viršuliškės, Šeškinė, Justiniškės, Pašilaičiai, Baltupiai, Fabijoniškės, Pilaitė) along 12 km long Kosmonautų Avenue (Astronauts’ Avenue). Since the very beginning, the construction of residential districts in Vilnius caused controversy: they were built in the spirit of slogans “Faster, Cheaper, Better!”, “An Apartment for Each Family!” and highly appreciated all-Union wide for excellent planning (Žirmūnai located in the north-eastern part of the city was awarded the USSR State Prize in 1968, whereas Lazdynai was granted the Lenin Prize in 1974; both added to the heritage list in the 1980s). Some pieces of architecture found in the aforementioned districts were also awarded a range of various state prizes.

After half a century people are still being involved in this socialist experiment, which is beginning to show his other – dark side. Maintenance of large-panel houses theoretically reaches 125 years, maintenance of building till capital reconstruction is considered to be from 30 (walls) to 60 (foundation) years. Facades should be renewed every eight years [3, 137]. However, in Vilnius the first large-panel multi-storey houses built in 1962 and later, still are not renovated properly. Condition of some buildings is now regarded as critical. Therefore, the question of destiny of the entire Soviet residential districts becomes inevitable: to renovate or build new ones in their place? Here we face various opinions. Opponents of renovation claim that if requirements of maintenance have not been complied for five decades (housing renovation was not implemented till 1996), now there is no point in saving these buildings. Real estate developers hold this notion from the beginning: Soviet multi-storey residential dwellings should be destroyed and new dwellings, compliant with modern comfort and construction requirements,

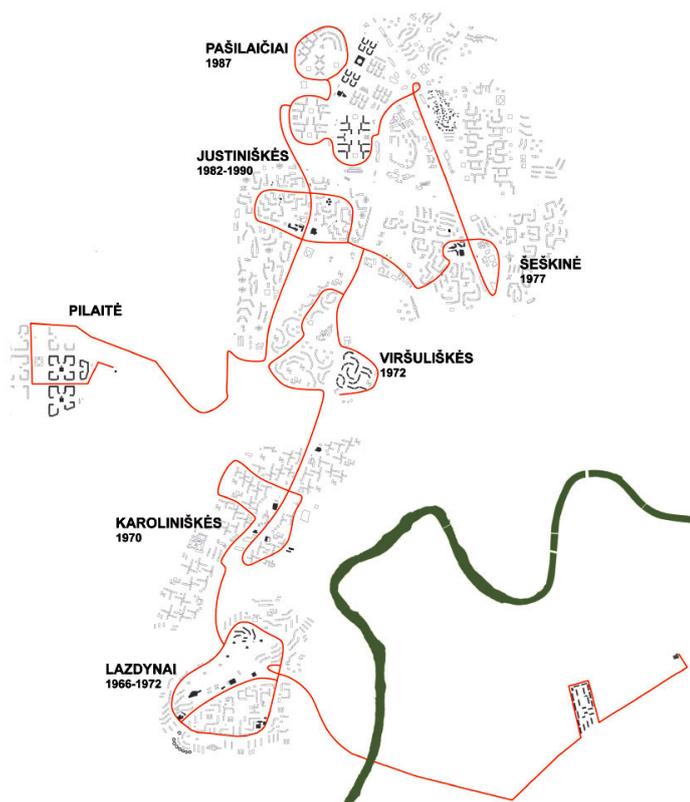


Fig. 1. The route of the first tour

must be built in their place. According to the study “Real Estate Value” prepared by the working group led by the Associate Professor Dr. Saulius Raslanas from Vilnius Gediminas Technical University [4, 31], significant investment in facilities is required to improve the aesthetic appearance of buildings, to repair critical construction spots and to extend terms of maintenance, as well as increase economic and environmental sustainability; moreover, it is almost impossible to change the layout of flats, and it is very unlikely that this struggle will increase the value of the buildings. The authors of this study have concluded that the renovation of Soviet residential buildings is economically inefficient and not recommended.

This position could be agreeable; however, it solves the problem from the economical point of view, whereas social problems should not be left outside as well. There are 6000 multi-storey dwellings in Vilnius; most of them are large-panel houses built in the period between the 1960s and 1990s. Refusal to renovate or to reconstruct them may lead to continuous deterioration of living conditions, as only a small number of people can afford to buy a new apartment. Some residents would choose an economic flat in a renovated building; however, nowadays such supply does not exist. The result – the number of middle-class families living in Soviet residential districts decreases. That is one of the most important, yet not clearly perceived, problems, which causes difficulties in establishing housing renovation programmes and projects.

However, these were reflections based on purely pragmatic interests. “All histories of building and architecture ask the same basic questions. These questions fall into two broad categories. The first group comprises questions concerned

with the conception, design and construction of buildings... The second group of questions, by contrast, concerns the subsequent history of buildings, after their completion...” [5, 2]. Hence, another important aspect is the architecture and urban planning of Soviet districts, which were highly assessed during the Soviet occupation, yet nowadays their architectural and urban accomplishments are often left unnoticed. 20 thousand multi-storey dwellings in Lithuania are being regarded as an obsolete inventory, which, referring to some – unfortunately, cannot be replaced, but that is just a temporary condition. On the other hand, these are the towns of scientific and technological revolution era, charming with all their exaggerated optimism and today’s poverty. If the participants of this discussion asked themselves “What are these districts?”, “Why are they the way they are?”, “What are their artistic, architectural and cultural values?”, the authors of this paper believe that the answers to these questions would accelerate the discussion.

Considering the importance of the problem and limitations of the classroom gatherings, the initiative group of the Architecture Fund has undertaken an experiment – to organise an exploratory tour (with expedition features) to the socialist city. Differing from a recreational excursion, this tour is unique and unitary. At the same time, it is continuous research. Each subsequent tour is based on the results of the previous one. Each participant is an expert with his or her own experience in respect of the object: some of them were involved in the planning of these districts, some designed the buildings, others lived and some would never live there. Also, we should not forget those who studied these areas in terms of architectural, sociological, cultural, technological or other aspects, and for whom they were a source of artistic inspiration.

For some people the Soviet residential districts are associated with mono-functional, unsafe, bleak environment settled by those who had no other choice; for the others, the districts represent an unexplored territory of Vilnius or the former/current place of residence remembered with nostalgia. The two approaches were vividly illustrated by the response of the public and professionals invited to the first excursions around Vilnius “sleeping” districts – that was a kind of experiment to determine who and why will be interested in taking a tour around the socialist experiment.

II. RESEARCH AT A SCALE OF 1:1

The first two tours were organized in 2011 under the title “A Perfect (Micro)Rayon: Do-It-Yourself”; the focus of attention was Astronauts Avenue (Lithuanian *Kosmonautų*, today renamed as *Laisvės* (Freedom) Avenue) – one of all-time largest urban projects implemented in Lithuania (Figure 1.). The answer to the question “What are these districts?” lies in the very title of the tour – “Do-It-Yourself”. Conception of these tours is partly based on the method of Roland Barthes [6]: in order to disclose the operation of a particular object, original object needs to be reconstructed, to create his own model, which would reveal something not seen or understood before. Reconstruction of the object combines two operations: decomposition and assembling. Decomposing a primary object means excluding its mobile parts – paradigms – whose distribution acquires a specific meaning. Parts in themselves do not make sense, but they are

such that the slightest change in their present configuration changes the whole. All the units (not regarding their inner structure or size, they may be very different) acquire significant presence only by their boundaries, which make them different from other actual units of discourse. All together they form a particular class. When the units are determined, rules of their relationship need to be ascertained and affixed. The operation of assembling has an anthropological value: it is a man himself, his history, situation, freedom, even resistance leading his mind against the nature. Acknowledging reality according to this method – decomposing, and then assembling – participants of excursions create intelligibility, which provides the reconstructed object meaning and artistic value.

All the districts are quite similar by composition thereof: 3–4 microrayons, groups of modular apartment blocks arranged around the public spaces, commercial/service centre, school, nursery-kindergarten, tower blocks, etc. Some of the aforementioned components are standard, whereas others are considered unique pieces of architecture. Excursion objects are split into three recurring categories: buildings, on which participants ascend, for example, high-rise dwellings (Figure 2), public buildings, which participants enter, for example, high school, kindergarten, shopping mall (Figure 3), open air public space, which participants traverse, for example, spaces created between public or residential buildings (Figure 4).

The focus of attention, during the first tour around Soviet “sleeping” districts, was pointed to the chronological evolution of events and its estimation of those days. Excursion started in the oldest quarter of large-panel system dwellings and continued in Soviet residential districts in the northwest part of Vilnius. It is hard to ignore the dissonance between today’s condition and the image one sees in Soviet chronicles. Co-author of Lazdynai district, architect Vytautas Brėdikis did not try to hide the bitterness failure by claiming that together with architect Vytautas Edmundas Čekanauskas they had created an English garden-city. However, after nearly 50 years, we see only the ruins of misshaped socialism, which at most reasonable sense should be covered with soil. Here the question arises whether salvation is still possible. Lazdynai architectural solutions highlighted the forested, terraced area and developed a system of public spaces – unique in Lithuania at that time. Distinctive large-panel multi-storey dwellings of Lazdynai had extraordinary, broken plans and were composed on the terraces using a sectional mode. In order to form comfortable and original spaces, landmark buildings were designed and implemented (for a big disappointment – only part) – shopping malls with distinguishing sculptural compositions, high schools of original architecture and 16-storey monolithic buildings marking the Baltic Highland and South-East Plain limits. Lazdynai fairyland, despite being partially implemented in the presence of ineffective planned socialist conditions, retains the reserve of trust and affection among the citizens and the community of architects even till today. Inspired by trips (1959) to Helsinki Tapiola district (1950–69) [7] the project had become the golden standard, according to which all the residential districts of the country, and especially of the capital city were measured at that time. Conceived by the government of that time, the enormous residential area



Fig. 2. Tower blocks in Lazdynai (above) and Šeškinė (below)

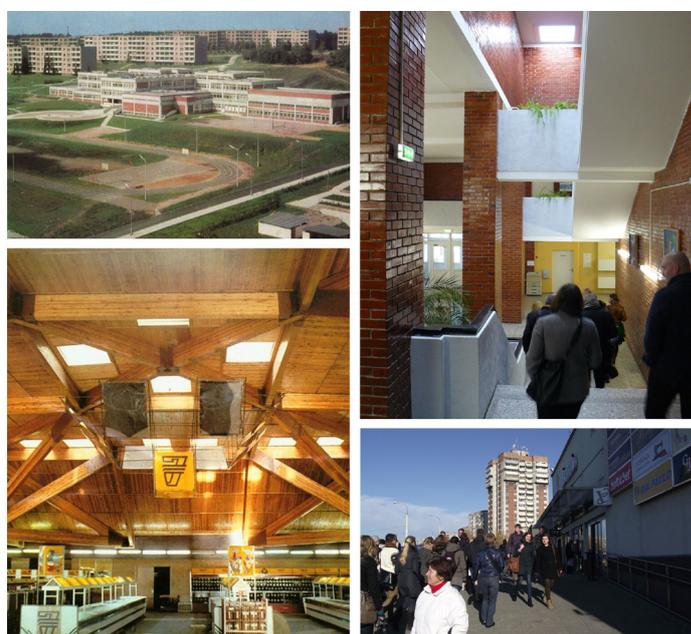


Fig. 3. Gymnasium in Lazdynai (above), shopping mall in Justiniškės (below)



Fig. 4. Open air public space in Justiniškės (above) and Pašilaičiai (below)

in the Northwest side of Vilnius eventually shaped as three different residential districts (Lazdynai, Karoliniškės, Viršuliškės), isolated from the historic city centre by parks and forests, all presenting distinguishing artistic features and their own identity. This part of the city is reasonably compared to the Toulouse-Le Mirail (1960s, arch. Candilis, Josic, Woods) campus, or unimplemented standard of modernist urban planning Amsterdam-Zuid Plan (1904, arch. Hendrik Petrus Berlage).

Architect Leonidas Pranas Ziberkas presented a research study concerning residential districts carried out in the 1980s. This created assumptions to compare experts' comments and fears at that time with today's realities. The fact that architects Brėdikis and Ziberkas still live in these districts and have experienced their problems from inside, with no doubt, adds value to their statements. Philosopher Nerijus Milerius, who a few years ago organised a series of the urban study seminars, a scientific conference and compiled a publication, presented the most relevant problems, concerning Soviet residential districts, highlighted during previously mentioned events [8, 9].

In the second excursion the following question was asked: "Why these districts are the way they are?". The tour was held with the participation of architect Sigitas Čerėškevičius, the co-author of Justiniškės district, one of the latest of those attached to Astronauts Avenue, and a general planning manager of municipal enterprise "Vilniaus planas", architect Marius Grabauskas. "Vilniaus planas" team – urban planning specialists, engineers and architects – are now in search for the ways on how to regenerate modernist Vilnius, which slowly turns into "depressive" zone. This excursion was oriented to professional community and examined such questions as: how the change in planning norms, for example, increasing building intensity, influences the cityscape, as well as the reasons why the artistic ideas, embodied in the competitive district projects, were transformed. Especially thoughtful discussion began while speaking about today's modernist district planning processes.

The third excursion was organised to explore Antakalnis and Žirmūnai districts located in the east side of Vilnius. Both created under the strong influence of the classical tradition of functionalist design and implemented on both sides of the Neris River – these early Vilnius Soviet districts are hardly comparable with each other. Žirmūnai is a pure example of *tabula rasa* conception, USSR state prize winner. Antakalnis, in turn, is an instance of harmonious mix of modernist, baroque, historicism, secession and regionalist architecture in architecture and tourist guidebooks often presented by separate distinguishing objects and rarely understood as an integral residential district, and this makes it somehow mystical. Invited participants were architects and architectural historians: Prof. Jurate Jurevičienė, PhD student Inga Genytė (Vilnius Gediminas Technical University), transport museum historian Ričardas Žickus, architect of a new student campus library Rolandas Palekas, as well as modern and technological heritage specialist, art critic Marija Drėmaitė. All participants were invited to take a ride with a vintage trolleybus Škoda. The vehicle has been chosen taking into account the importance of Antakalnis in Vilnius transport system development. One street in Antakalnis is entitled Tramvajų (Tram Street) – the name is the only one relict that is left of horse

tram system once used in the city. First trolleybus line was also built in Antakalnis. This was intended solely to draw attention to the current widely evolving Lithuania's capital communication issues.

It is exceptional that this type of tours attracted and still attracts foreign researchers' attention. In 2011 the Architecture Fund held several excursions concerning modernist buildings in the centre of Vilnius as well as residential buildings in peripheral area, with participation of DOCOMOMO (Documentation and Conservation of Modern Movement) annual assembly members. Later, in 2012, tours were held with a partnership of Prof. Anna Bronovitskaya (Moscow Architectural Institute) and Frankfurt Stādelschule student group led by an artist Simon Starling.

In spring 2012, an exploratory trip was organized for the purpose to highlight all aspects of modernist Vilnius artistic value. Invited guests were modern architecture researchers: Professor Miles Glendinning (University of Edinburgh), Marija Drėmaitė, philosopher Nerijus Milerius (Vilnius University), founder of community cultural centre in Pilaitė district, designer Andrius Ciplijauskas. During the excursion participants were invited to visit Vilnius TV Tower – the unfolding view of the historical and modernist urban panoramas allowed for a more systematic assessment of the object, which led to new turns in the discussion. The tour took place in Soviet residential districts, already visited in the previous excursions and extended with a visit to a representative functionalistic object – mono-functional Santariškės hospital complex. These kind of tours were a unique opportunity to see the Soviet "sleeping" districts from a different point of view, and evaluate the "margins" of Vilnius modernism more positively in a broader international context.

III. EXCURSION AS PROVOCATION

Architectural excursion as a tool was chosen in order to provoke the complement of the personal memories/stories by historical facts and comments of the architects having designed the districts, thereby encouraging the very participants of the tours to re-think the concepts of "[im]perfect" district.

Unlike the round table discussion inside four walls, excursion works as a non-stop illustration, live images generate fresh and new turns in a discussion and the presence of 'reality' does not accept lies. Excursion, as a totally informal event provided an opportunity to invite professionals with various fields of interests and acknowledge their "unedited" opinions. That is another advantage of this kind of event – a double narrative, where an official version finds its liaison with unofficial, somewhat, silent part of district history. Initiators believe that this is particularly important when shaping self-consciousness of local residents.

Most participants of the tours are the people who live or used to live in Soviet residential districts. In addition to their own personal stories, they were interested in the history of their district development in terms of more objective assessment. On the other hand, there were some participants who had the "first time" experience visiting these residential districts. Despite the fact that each district was designed referring to an individual urban and architectural idea more or less reflected in the construction of buildings; neither its residents, nor other citizens have clear perception of it today. As it has always been stated

in the art world “narratives create value”. Stories and legends are often linked with the old towns of cities, being part of their *genius loci* and “charm”. Architectural excursions around Soviet residential districts were a perfect platform for personal stories of the residents to collide with those of the architects; therefore, they frame an identity and story.

Another aspect of personal stories is clearly defined by the name of the very first excursion: “Do-it-yourself”. Processes of increasing the inner added value have already started in the Soviet times, when residents aspired to improve and individualise inner space of their flats. Now these unique activities become the topic of scientific research [10, 3]. Residents propose wide-scale and multi-function public spaces as well – from gardens and micro-sculpture parks to the cultural community centre “BeePart” (Figure 5). Being the latest one-man-initiative in Pilaitė, “BeePart” asks directly whether such a cultural centre in the district is able to increase the added value of the district [11]. Initiators of the excursions re-ask: could the tours around the Soviet residential districts be the tool that helps the residents to re-appreciate their environment? And even more: could discussions commenced during the tours provoke actual moves of the professionals? One of the direct consequences of excursions is the measurement of playground area of pre-school in Karoliniškės, done by students of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Faculty of Architecture, in summer 2012 (under the guidance of Dr. Arch. Virginijus Gerdvilis). A sudden response to the striking news is that this playground of exceptional design will soon be demolished (Figure 6). The topic of public spaces for children can possibly be continued – there are plans to organise a workshop designated for this theme. “Vietos.org” – the project initiated by architects Tomas Grunskis, Liutauras Nekrošius and Martynas Mankus together with students at VGTU, Faculty of Architecture. The authors, who placed Hazel in public space research, developed conceptual suggestions for regeneration, which are presented at the project website for public assessment, inviting communities to take the lead when dealing with essential issues regarding quality of living environment [12] (Figure 7). Maybe soon we will be able to declare definitely what is considered to be the perfect neighbourhood and what is missing. Maybe the actions taken by the architects’ community would provoke reflections from social and governmental institutions. These issues are the codes for further research.

CONCLUSIONS

The pragmatic side of modernisation of Vilnius modernist residential districts (that still are awaiting the comprehensive and thorough re-thinking and appreciation), adequate distance of time and gradually declining reflex of Soviet heritage rejection provoke new questions about modernist residential districts of the Soviet times: “What are these districts?”, “Why are they the way they are?”, “What are their artistic- architectural and cultural values?” The authors believe that the answers to these questions would accelerate and upgrade the processes of appreciation, revitalisation and adaptation of the Soviet residential districts in context of needs of the 21st century. Considering this topicality and the lack of audience attention, the initiative groups of the Architecture Fund ventured the experiment of organising



Fig. 5. Cultural community centre “BeePart”



Fig. 6. Playground area of the pre-school in Karoliniškės

a series of explorative excursions around the socialist city in the period 2011–2012.

The conception of architectural excursions is partially based on the method of Roland Barthes: in order to disclose the operation of a particular object, the original object needs to be reconstructed, to create its own model, which would reveal something not seen or understood before. Reconstruction of the object combines two operations: decomposition and assembling. Excursion objects are split into three recurring categories: buildings, on which participants ascend; public buildings, which participants enter; open air public space, which participants traverse. All these trajectories are completed by the narrative of a district. Acknowledging reality according to this method – decomposing, and then assembling – participants of excursions create intelligibility, which provides the reconstructed object meaning and artistic value. Differing from a recreational excursion, this tour is unique and unitary. At the same time, it is continuous research. Each subsequent tour is based on the results of the previous one. Each participant is an expert with his or her own experience in respect of the object.



Fig. 7. Screenshot of “vietos.org” trailer

The public architectural excursion is used as a tool researching modernist residential districts at a scale of 1:1 and providing a platform for interdisciplinary discussion on the spot. This format provokes a double narrative, where the official version finds its liaison with unofficial, somewhat, silent part of district history. ‘Narratives create value’ – architectural excursions around the Soviet residential districts were a perfect platform for personal stories of the residents to collide with those of the architects; therefore, they frame an identity and story. Excursion is a remedy provoking (or coordinating) the public initiatives to clarify the concept of the perfect habitat and the ways to attain it. Public excursion is an irreplaceable tool attaining publicity and updating information about the current state and alterations inside the residential districts, as well as obligation to verify topical questions on the spot eliminating misapprehension or obscure interpretations. This is an unexpected way to expand the boundaries of unexplored Vilnius, too.

Architectural excursions around the modernist residential districts work as the expeditions without any strict declarations so far. On the other hand, such occasions as emerging public studies (vietos.org in Lazdynai), public initiatives (Beepart in Pilaitė), fixation of status quo at the critical points of alteration (measurement of pre-school in Karoliniškės by VGTU students) hopefully suggest that maybe architectural excursions and other actions taken by the architects’ community will provoke reflections from social and governmental institutions; and that maybe soon we will be able to declare definitely what is the perfect neighbourhood and what is still missing.

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